魔法科高校の劣等生 6

The irregular at magic high school

横浜騒乱編〈上〉

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

魔法科高校（まほうかこうこう）の劣等生（れっとうせい）⑥
横浜騒乱編（よこはまそうらんへん）<上（じょう）>

秋。

『全国高校生魔法学論文コンペティション』の季節がやってきた。日頃の研究成果を魔法装置を使った『実演』でプレゼンテーションするこの催し物は、九校戦で成績が振るわなかった学校の雪辱戦とも言える。魔法学、魔法技能、先端魔法技術を披露する最高の舞台だった。

『劣等生』司波達也（しばたつや）は、第一高校の代表・鈴音（すずね）のサポートメンバーとして参加、その魔法技能を如何なく発揮していた。

時を同じくして、暗躍する組織の影があった。諜報員（スパイ）、同じ魔法科高校の生徒、『大陸』から来た暗殺者……。

達也の類い希なる頭脳と能力と、その『成果』を狙い、コンペティションは陰謀に巻き込まれる——。

華麗なる司波兄妹の活躍に、刮目せよ。

魔法科高校の劣等生 6

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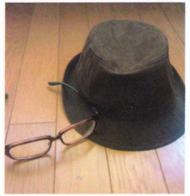
さ-14-6

魔法科高校の劣等生⑥
横浜騒乱編〈上〉

佐島 勤

電撃文庫

Ⓨ590



佐島（さとう） 勤（つとむ）

西暦19XX年、日本の片田舎に生まれる。和洋のスペースオペラを糧に少年時代を過ごす。青年時代、ファンタジーと伝奇小説に転向。卒業後、企業戦士（ただし雑兵）として現実世界に魂を売り渡すも、西暦2011年、遅れてきたジュブナイル作家として空想世界に帰還を果たす。（本プロフィールには虚偽と誇張表現が含まれています）

【電撃文庫作品】

魔法科高校の劣等生① 入学編<上>
魔法科高校の劣等生② 入学編<下>
魔法科高校の劣等生③ 九校戦編<上>
魔法科高校の劣等生④ 九校戦編<下>
魔法科高校の劣等生⑤ 夏休み編+1
魔法科高校の劣等生⑥ 横浜騒乱編<上>

イラスト：石田可奈（いしだかな）

西暦19XX年生まれ。挿絵は初仕事。本業はアニメーター。現在は『アクエリオンEVOL』キャラクターデザインを担当。
SpecialThanks：ジミーストーンさん、松原麻弓さん、しぐれさん、光陵瑠華さん、伊藤タテキさん。

魔法科高校の劣等生

The irregular at magic high school

6

横浜騒乱編〈上〉

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE

『……………』
『あっ、いたいた！　おーい、達也くーん』
『論文コンペの本番まで、残り三週間しかありません。今からこのチームに加わることができるのは、司波君だけだと判断しました」

市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね

魔法科高校の生徒会会計。美少女というより美人と表現する方が相応しい容姿を持つ。風貌通りの冷静沈着な性格。愛称は「リンちゃん」だが、真由美しか呼んでいない。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

通称「レオ」。達也と同じく一年E組所属。父親がハーフ、母親がクォーター。『硬化魔法』を得意とする。

司波達也

しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校一年E組所属。『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒。得意分野は魔法術式補助演算機（CAD）の設計など技術系。

「この状況で俺の力を知られたくない。深雪、お前が頼りだ」

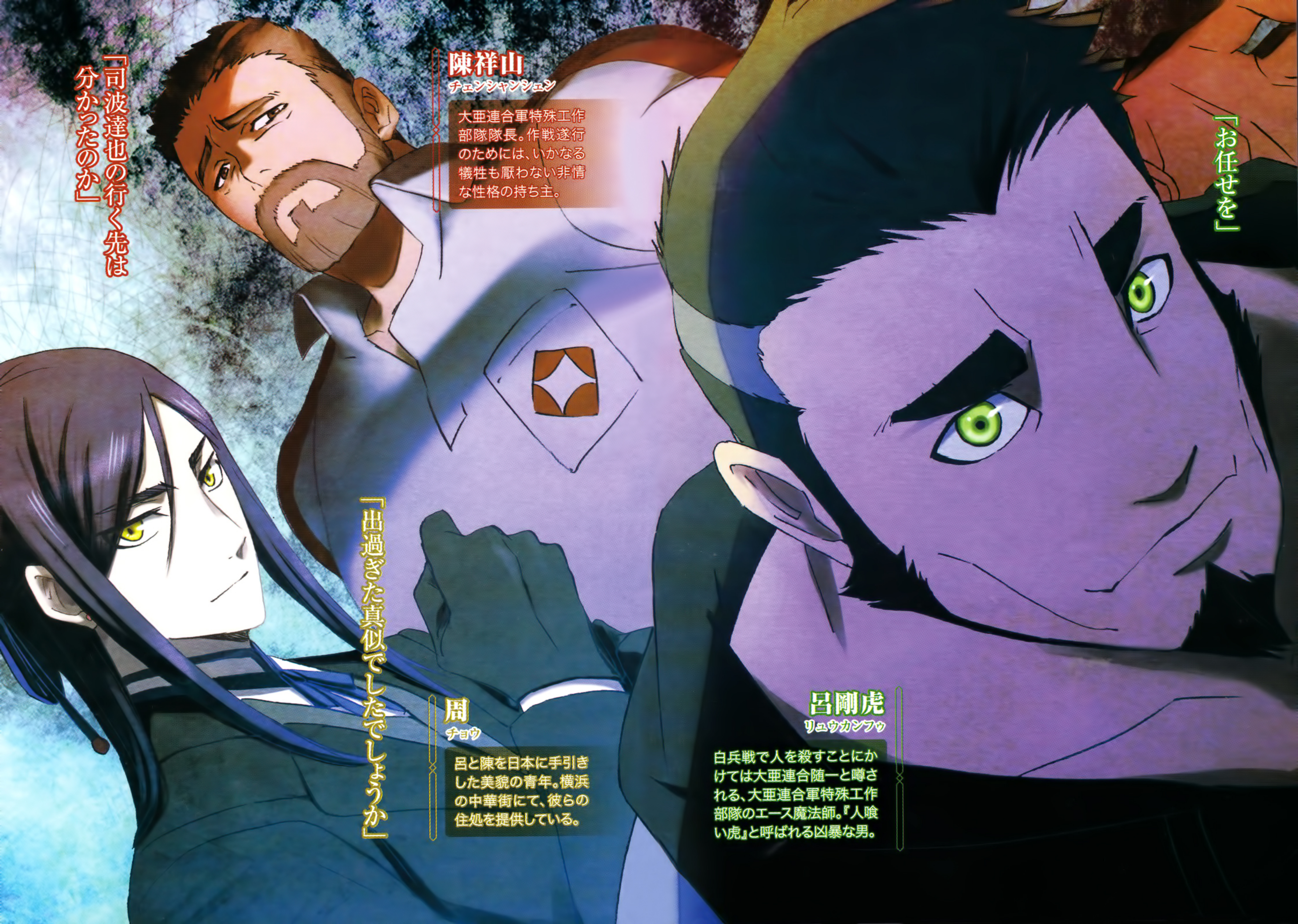
「はい！」

司波深雪

しば・みゆき

司波兄妹の妹。1年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

「すけべへんたいのぞきまさっさとしめろばかーっ！」


「お任せを」
「出過ぎた真似でしたでしょうか」
「司波達也の行く先は分かったのか」

呂剛虎
リュウカンフゥ

白兵戦で人を殺すことにかけては大亜連合随一と噂される、大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊のエース魔法師。『人喰い虎』と呼ばれる凶暴な男。

陳祥山
チェンシャンシェン

大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊隊長。作戦遂行のためには、いかなる犠牲も厭わない非情な性格の持ち主。

周
チョウ

呂と陳を日本に手引きした美貌の青年。横浜の中華街にて、彼らの住処を提供している。

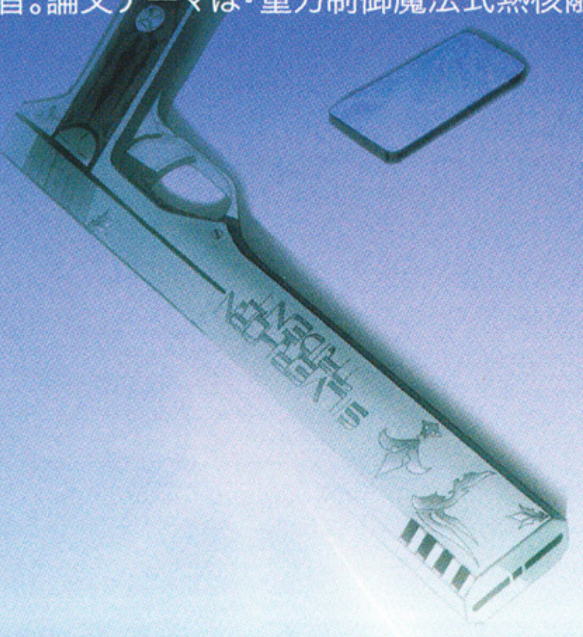
日本魔法協会主催
「全国高校生魔法学論文コンペティション」

全国の高校生が魔法学、魔法工学の研究成果を発表する場。注目度も高く、発表チームの代表が魔法研究機関からスカウトされるというだけでなく、発表された論文がそのまま魔法大全に収録され大学や企業に利用されることもある。しかし全国高校生といっても、正規の教育課程で魔法理論を教える高校は魔法大学付属高校の九校以外に無い。この論文コンペも実質的には九校で競う催し物であり、九校戦が「武」の対抗戦であるとしたら、論文コンペはこれと双璧をなす「文」の九校間対抗戦と言える。

非魔法科高校を対象とした弁論大会や研究発表会と「全国高校生魔法学論文コンペティション」の最大の違いは、発表内容の実演がプレゼンテーションに含まれるという点にある。つまり論文の発表には、魔法装置を作って壇上で魔法を実演することが含まれる。実演のためには、魔法装置の設計から術式補助システムの製作、それを制御する為のソフト、搭載する為のボディなど、高度かつ手間のかかる準備が必要となる。コンペ直前の時期ともなれば、各高校総じて、技術系クラブ、美術系クラブはもちろんのこと、純理論系のクラブや実技の成績上位者も本番の成功へ向けて総動員される。

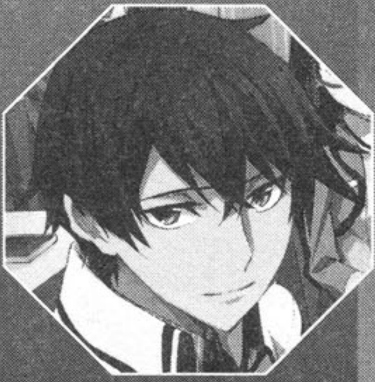
開催日は毎年十月の最終日曜日と決められており、開催地は京都と横浜で交互に行われる。これは日本魔法協会の本部が京都、副本部的な位置づけの関東支部が横浜にあるからで、今年の会場は横浜国際会議場である。

第一高校では、論文コンペの出場者は校内の論文選考会で決定され、論文の作成とプレゼンの準備は選出された三人が共同で取り組む。基本的には、方向性の統一のためメインの執筆者一名とサブ二名の役割分担をしたチーム構成となる。今回のメインは、市原鈴音。論文テーマは『重力制御魔法式熱核融合炉の技術的可能性』である。

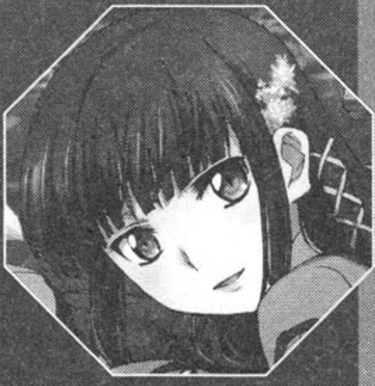


The irregular
at magic high school

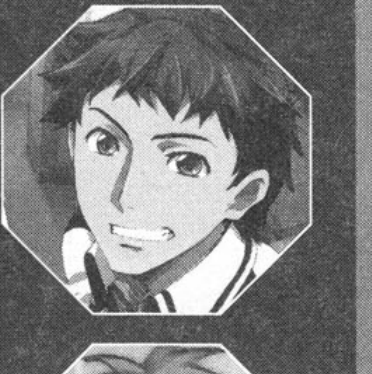
Character
キャラクター紹介



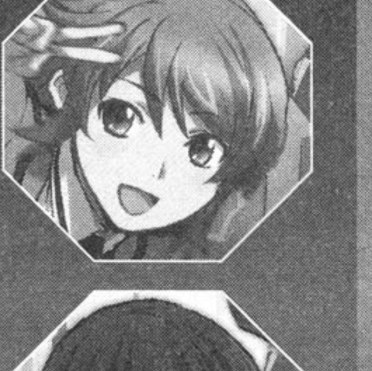
司波達也
しば・たつや
1年E組。『雑草』と
揶揄される二科生(劣等生)。
全てに達観している。



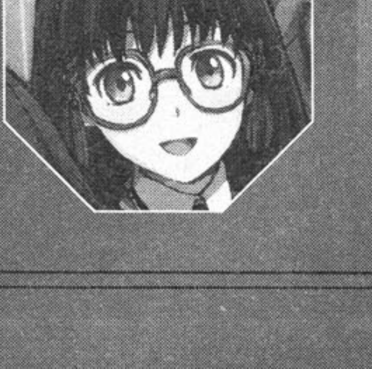
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
1年A組。達也の妹。
主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。



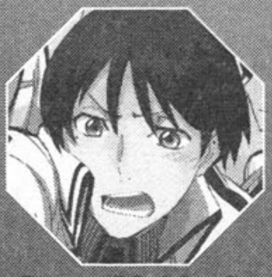
西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
硬化魔法が得意。明るい性格。



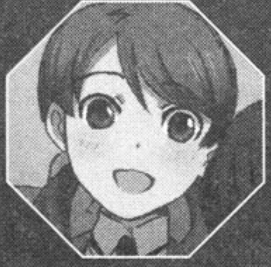
千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
達也のクラスメイト。
剣術が得意。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。



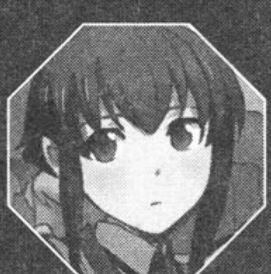
柴田美月
しばた・みづき
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。



吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
古式魔法の名家。
エリカとは幼少時からの顔見知り。



光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。



北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

森崎 駿
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としての
プライドが高い。

里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
1年D組。美少年と
見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

明智英美
あけち・えいみ
1年B組。クォーターで、
フルネームはアメリア＝
英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。

桜小路紅葉
さくらこうじ・あかは
1年B組。
スバル、エイミィの友達。
私服はゴスロリ風で、
テーマパーク好き。

七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。元生徒会会長。魔法科生徒の中でも
その能力は歴代最高クラス。

中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。真由美にかわって
生徒会会長となる。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。

市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
三年生。元・生徒会会計。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。
真由美の右腕。

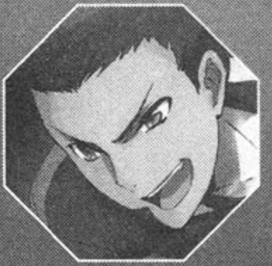
服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。元・生徒会副会長。
克人にかわり、部活連の
会頭となる。

渡辺摩利
わたなべ・まり
三年生。元風紀委員会委員長。
真由美の親友で、
物事全般にやや好戦的。

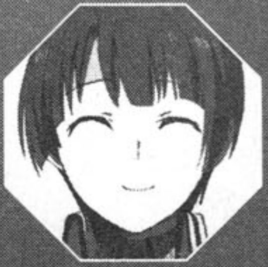
辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。元風紀委員。豪快な性格の持ち主。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前がコンプレックス。

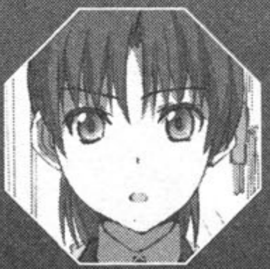
関本 勲
せきもと・いさお
三年生。風紀委員会所属。
論文コンペ校内選考次点。



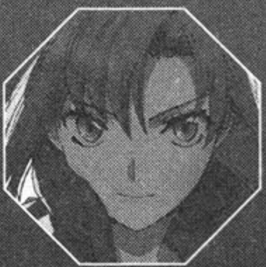
桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。
剣術部所属。関東剣術大会
中等部のチャンピオン。



五十里 啓
いそり・けい
二年生。生徒会会計。
魔法理論の成績は
学年トップ。千代田花音とは
許嫁同士。

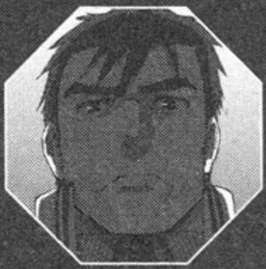


壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の
全国二位。



千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
二年生。摩利にかわり、
風紀委員長となる。
五十里啓とは許嫁同士。

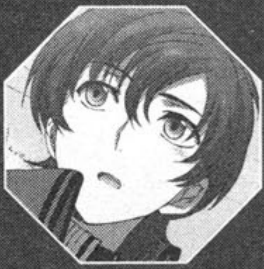
平河小春
ひらかわ・こはる
三年生。九校戦ではエンジニアで参加。
論文コンペメンバーを辞退。



十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。
元・部活連の会頭。

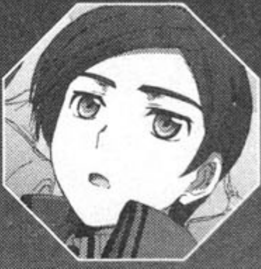
平河千秋
ひらかわ・ちあき
１年Ｇ組所属。達也に敵意を向ける。

安宿怜美
あすか・さとみ
保険医。おっとりホンワカした
笑顔が男子生徒に人気。

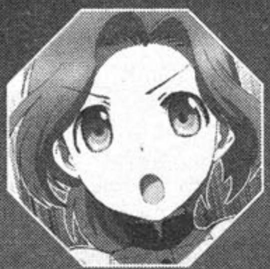


一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。

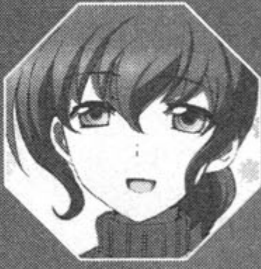
廿楽計夫
つづら・かずお
教師。専門は魔法幾何学。
論文コンペの世話役。



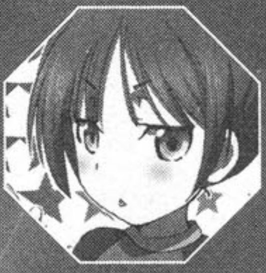
吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。



一条 茜
いちじょう・あかね
一条家の長女。
将輝の妹。
小学生だが、
ややマセている。



一条美登里
いちじょう・みどり
将輝の母親。
温和な性格で
料理上手。



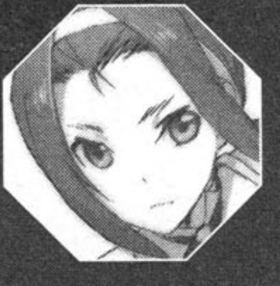
一条瑠璃
いちじょう・るり
一条家の次女。将輝の妹。
マイペースなしっかりもの。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

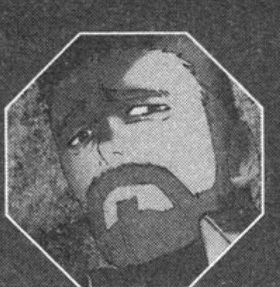
千葉寿和
ちば・としかず
千葉エリカの長兄。警察省のキャリア組。
一見は遊び人風。

千葉修次
ちば・なおつぐ
千葉エリカの次兄。摩利の恋人。
千刃流剣術免許皆伝で
「千葉の麒麟児」の異名をとる。

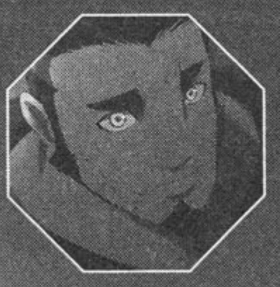
牛山
うしやま
フォア・リーブス・テクノロジーCAD開発
第三課主任。達也が信頼を置く人物。



リン
森崎が助けた少女。
フルネームは
『孫美鈴(スンメイリン)』。
香港系国際犯罪シンジケート
「無頭竜」の新たなリーダー。



陳祥山
チェンシャンシェン
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊隊長。
非情な性格の持ち主。



呂剛虎
リュウカンフゥ
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊所属の
エース魔法師。
別名『人喰い虎』。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、裏の顔も持つ。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は少佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

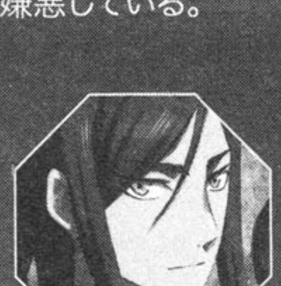
山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める女性士官。
階級は少尉。

九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の一人と
目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

司波小百合
しば・さゆり
達也と深雪の義母。二人を嫌悪している。

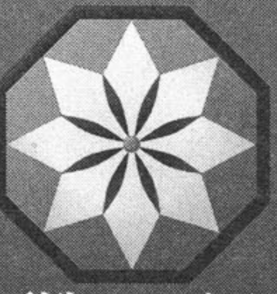
周
チョウ
呂と陳を日本に手引きした
美貌の青年。



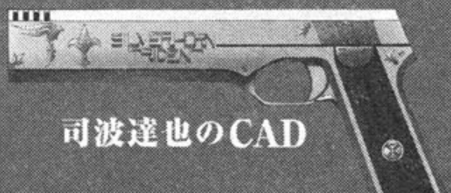
Glossary
用語解説

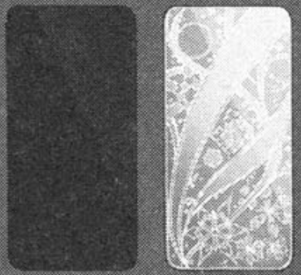
魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で
一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが
刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。


一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。
内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。
特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。


司波達也のCAD


司波深雪のCAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。
元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により
一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを
十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学において
エイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、
「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。
魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、
そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については
未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

魔法師
『魔法技能師』の略語。魔法技能師とは、実用レベルで魔法を行使するスキルを持つ者の総称。

魔法式
事象に付随する情報を一時的に改変する為の情報体。魔法師が保有するサイオンで構築されている。

魔法演算領域

魔法式を構築する精神領域。魔法という才能の、いわば本体。魔法師の無意識領域に存在し、
魔法師は通常、魔法演算領域を意識して使うことは出来ても、そこで行われている処理のプロセスを
意識することは出来ない。魔法演算領域は、魔法師自身にとってもブラックボックスと言える。

魔法式の出力プロセス

❶起動式をCADから受信する。これを「起動式の読込」という。
❷起動式に変数を追加して魔法演算領域に送る。
❸起動式と変数から魔法式を構築する。
❹構築した魔法式を、無意識領域の最上層にして
意識領域の最下層たる「ルート」に転送、意識と無意識の
狭間に存在する「ゲート」から、イデアへ出力する。
❺イデアに出力された魔法式は、指定された座標の
エイドスに干渉しこれを書き換える。

単一系統・単一工程の魔法で、この五段階のプロセスを
半秒以内で完了させることが、「実用レベル」の
魔法師としての目安になる。

魔法の評価基準（魔法力）

サイオン情報体を構築する速さが魔法の処理能力であり、
構築できる情報体の規模が魔法のキャパシティであり、
魔法式がエイドスを書き換える強さが干渉力、
この三つを総合して魔法力と呼ばれる。

基本コード仮説

「加速」「加重」「移動」「振動」「収束」「発散」「吸収」「放出」の四系統八種にそれぞれ対応した
プラスとマイナス、合計十六種類の基本となる魔法式が存在していて、
この十六種類を組み合わせることで全ての系統魔法を構築することができるという理論。

系統魔法

四系統八種に属する魔法のこと。

系統外魔法

物質的な現象ではなく精神的な現象を操作する魔法の総称。
心霊存在を使役する神霊魔法・精霊魔法から読心、幽体分離、意識操作まで多種にわたる。

十師族

日本で最強の魔法師集団。一条（いちじょう）、一之倉（いちのくら）、一色（いっしき）、二木（ふたつぎ）、
二階堂（にかいどう）、二瓶（にへい）、三矢（みつや）、三日月（みかづき）、四葉（よつば）、五輪（いつわ）、
五頭（ごとう）、五味（いつみ）、六塚（むつづか）、六角（ろっかく）、六郷（ろくごう）、六本木（ろっぽんぎ）、
七草（さえぐさ）、七宝（しっぽう）、七夕（たなばた）、七瀬（ななせ）、八代（やつしろ）、八朔（はっさく）、
八幡（はちまん）、九島（くどう）、九鬼（くき）、九頭見（くずみ）、十文字（じゅうもんじ）、十山（とおやま）の
二十八の家系から四年に一度の「十師族選定会議」で選ばれた十の家系が『十師族』を名乗る。

数字付き

十師族の苗字に一から十までの数字が入っているように、百家の中でも本流とされている家系の
苗字には“『千』代田”、“『五十』里”、“『千』葉”家の様に、十一以上の数字が入っている。
数値の大小が力の強弱を表すものではないが、苗字に数字が入っているかどうかは、
血筋が大きく物を言う、魔法師の力量を推測する一つの目安となる。

数字落ち

エクストラ・ナンバーズ、略して「エクストラ」とも呼ばれる、「数字」を剥奪された魔法師の一族。
かつて、魔法師が兵器であり実験体サンプルであった頃、「成功例」としてナンバーを与えられた
魔法師が、「成功例」に相応しい成果を上げられなかった為に捺された烙印。

Chapter 1

It was October of 2095. In order to achieve 'round-the-clock' operation, harbor facilities have already been upgraded to automatic services, so there was essentially no one present. The vast majority of the personnel clocked in during the daytime, and, aside from a few security personnel, only machines were active at night processing the incoming and outbound ships as well as unloading cargo.

With the reduction in personnel, each harbor was being redeveloped to prevent illegal immigration, and was set at a prudent distance from the duty-free areas and city streets, thus prohibiting the sailors from coming ashore in those areas.

During the night, when only the automatic services were in operation, the areas forbidden to all ships extended beyond the shoreline for the duty-free zone. Passengers who wished to disembark had to wait until the morning when the dock personnel arrived. Therefore, there should have been no one present during the middle of the night.

However, around midnight, a group of people concealing their presence appeared at the Yokohama Wharf.

"We have illegal aliens of unknown nationality coming ashore from the small cargo ship in Cargo Pier 5. All personnel, converge on Cargo Pier 5 immediately."

Once the directions came over the intercom, two plain-clothed detectives glanced at one another and broke into a run. Yet, their expressions were diametrically opposed.

"Ah ha, so they were there."

"This isn't the time to complain, Inspector!"

"But, Inagaki-kun."

"Shut up and run!"

"I'm your superior."

"But I'm older than you."

"Ah ah."

While returning an appropriate response to his older subordinate, Inspector Chiba Toshikazu quickened his footsteps. There were 700 meters between Pier 5 and Pier 3, where they were stationed at. No matter how hard they tried, this was still a two minute journey at least. Despite their bantering, Inspector Chiba and Assistant Inspector Inagaki arrived in 30 seconds.

This wasn't a normal human's speed.

Neither of them were normal humans. They were both Magicians.

"We are really undermanned."

"Nothing we can do. Only police officers who are Magicians can handle criminals who wield magic."

"In reality, it's not, entirely, like that!"

As he said these unmotivated words, Inspector Chiba sprang into the air.

He was holding a bokken that was approximately one meter in length.

In midair, Inspector Chiba waved his bokken like a leaf soaring through the wind, and passed cleanly over the crowd of illegal aliens who were firing three round bursts from assault rifles with silencers attached. Setting aside his leg strength, no one would be able to achieve this sort of trajectory through the air without the aid of magic.

That irregular trajectory threw off the aim of all the illegal aliens who were trying to provide covering fire.

Towards the three Magicians standing in the back of the crowd hurtling long range magic attacks, Inspector Chiba slashed a spiraling attack.

Using Move-Type Magic that blatantly ignored gravity and inertia to avoid the aim of enemy magic attacks, Chiba used his bokken to knock them all out in turn.

On the other side of the crowd, Inagaki was using his handgun to take out the gunners.

Once Chiba joined the fray from the flank, over ten foreigners were suppressed within the blink of an eye.

While other small-scale conflicts broke out in other areas, they were quickly handled before the two could get there and offer assistance.

"Inspector, take the helm!"

"Eh~, me?"

"Stop dilly dallying!"

Seeing these partners, it was obviously the subordinate who was more proactive on the job. (More like his superior was too lacking in professionalism.) Even so, it's not like he could bail on the scene right now.

"OK, OK. Then, Inagaki-kun, stop the boat for me."

"...If I do that, I might sink this thing."

"No worries. The captain will take full responsibility."

"...Wow, he's not taking the responsibility himself..."

He shrugged in disappointment while continuing to load bullets into his handgun.

His left hand pressed the switch on the handle and the targeting scope attached to the barrel of the handgun lit up.

Immediately afterwards, he used the Weaponized Integrated CAD — a revolver-shaped weaponized calculation device in the handle — and a Specialized CAD in the actual body began the Activation Sequence.

At the same time as he squeezed the trigger, the Magic Sequence kicked in.

Using Move and Weight Compound Magic to stabilize the trajectory and increase penetration, a metallic bullet traced the trajectory set by the Magic Sequence and pierced through the stern of the small ship moored off the coast.

A second and third gunshot rang through the night. The foam sprouting from the stern weakened. Based on the ship's external appearance, the shots had successfully penetrated the accelerator on board.

"Nicely done."

Leisurely praising his subordinate, a sound came from Chiba's hand like a lock being undone.

Apparently, the bokken he was carrying was actually a sword cane.

With a brilliant blade of cold steel in hand, Chiba dashed towards the floating ship with an agility that matched Yoshitsune himself as he skipped over 8 ships in a row.

He swung his blade at the parked ship and rent the metallic cargo door in two.

The secret sword technique "Iron Breaker" from the Hundred Families' Chiba Family.

This technique did not view the sword to be cast from iron and steel, but identified the "sword" itself as a concept and applied Move-Type Magic to the slashing motion with the aid of the Magic Sequence.

A "sword" identified as a singular concept turned into a molecular blade that couldn't be shattered, blunted, or broken as it cut through all resistance along the slashing axis.

Once more swinging his blade to clear a path, the Chiba Family's heir, Chiba Toshikazu, pressed on alone.

"Nice work, Inspector."

"Seriously, this is what they call wasting your time and energy."

The sky was already turning lighter as Inspector Chiba groused complaints as if the situation had nothing to do with him. Likewise, he didn't berate his subordinate who was obviously trying to hold back gales of laughter.

After bravely charging into the ship, he found that there was no one on board.

It appeared that the illegal aliens had already evacuated from the bottom of the ship, leaving the gate open to allow water to flood in. The leisurely pace the boat was sinking at was exacerbated by the opening Chiba left behind for the wind to flow through, increasing the rate the boat sank at, and it was currently completely submerged in water.

"Looks like we don't have any clues to which direction the miscreants fled."

"However, their final destination is blatantly obvious."

The young man who almost went down with the ship shrugged his shoulders at what his older subordinate wanted to say and gazed eastward towards the rising sun.

◊ ◊ ◊

Directly before Inspector Chiba's eyes was the wharf, which wasn't far away, along with the renowned streets of Yokohama known throughout the nation.

A large well was situated in the backyard of one of the nameless restaurants along the streets. Despite the early hours, three well-dressed men were standing around it.

One of them was approximately in his twenties.

One of them appeared particularly handsome. Of course, this wasn't in a feminine manner, but because he came from a line of breeding and prosperity. The well with an attached pulley he was watching was not meant for consumption but for firefighting instead.

The wall of the well directly below the pulley suddenly crumbled without warning. A soaked man squirmed out of the gaping hole followed by 15 others.

The middle-aged man who emerged last from the well bowed to the young man in greeting with a humble smile on his face. The young man put his right hand over his left breast and returned a slight bow.

"Everyone, please go get changed. Breakfast has already been prepared."

In regards to the young man's words,

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Zhou."

The middle-aged man replied in a tone devoid of gratitude.

Still, the young man smiled regardless of the other side's rude tone, and led the 16 men into the building.

◊ ◊ ◊

The first new Student Council for the National Magic University affiliated First High had started roughly a week ago.

Currently, Tatsuya and his peers from Class E arrived at the cafeteria for their lunch break.

He had dined in the Student Council Room before, but that was Mayumi (largely) abusing her power.

In addition, he didn't plan on making it a habit to eat lunch in the Student Council Room every day. With the new Student Council in session, Tatsuya also came to the cafeteria to eat.

However, a natural result of this was that Miyuki also started dining in the cafeteria. Add in their mutual friends, and a lively luncheon had become a regular event since the start of October.

That being said, since Tatsuya, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, and Mikihiko were in a different class than Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku, the first group that arrived would reserve a table. Today, Tatsuya and company seemed to be waiting for Miyuki's group.

"Sorry for the wait, everyone."

"No worries; good work today."

They waited for approximately ten minutes after Miyuki sent word ahead of time to Tatsuya that she would be delayed due to Student Council business. Seeing Miyuki intentionally bow in apology in front of him, Tatsuya smiled as he reassured her as was well. Completely heedless of this eye-catching behavior, Honoka seemed to receive some sort of signal and also huddled down as she spoke to Tatsuya.

"My apologies, Tatsuya-kun. They were late because of me."

After the night of confession at Ogasawara during their summer vacation, Honoka's responses and facial expressions towards Tatsuya had only intensified. Naturally, Tatsuya was aware of this, but he chose not to mention this. Now, if he wanted to be more proactive about this, he should probably smile a little — even a wry one would do — but Honoka's frail and oversensitive reactions might make it seem like Tatsuya was intentionally abusing her, which wasn't good for her mental state anyway. Hence, he didn't have a good solution at this moment. It's not like he could explain every time that this was born out of a misunderstanding, so Tatsuya simply gave up on the current situation and took a completely passive stance.

"Please don't be concerned on that account. Anyone who just started a new job usually encounters a few difficulties."

In Tatsuya's eyes, Honoka believed that her personal mistake led to everyone's disappointment, and that was why she seemed so down. Did she really believe she was incapable? While Tatsuya didn't believe that for a second, he still diligently tried to reassure Honoka with comforting words.

"Yeah, no need to worry about that."

"It's only been a week."

Erika and Leo unexpectedly (?) displayed their sensitive sides and chimed in along with Tatsuya.

Seeing everyone wearing a "Don't worry about it" smile, Honoka sat down with trepidation.

"However, today really wasn't Honoka's fault, Onii-sama. The Faculty Office suddenly asked to see 'all the records from two years ago,' so we had to bring up all the data from the Student Council Room before third period ended. We even got Shizuku to help us."

Miyuki smiled as she also provided support, but, for some reason, this made Honoka shrink even more on her chair.

"But...didn't Miyuki find it very quickly; meaning I'm the one who's lacking..."

"Me too. If Honoka's a turtle, then I'm a snail."

Shizuku's comment didn't have any ulterior meaning.

"...After all, Miyuki had been using this system since April. Honoka just joined the Student Council, and Shizuku is an outsider... Miyuki has a giant head start on you in terms of experience. It can't be helped if you take some time to get used to the system."

So Tatsuya directed his comment towards Honoka's nonmalicious description as a "turtle," and once again reassured Honoka and Shizuku.

Still, based on the aforementioned comment, with the election of the new Student Council, Honoka had also joined the executives on the council.

The new Student Council consisted of President Nakajou Azusa, Vice President Shiba Miyuki, Secretary Mitsui Honoka, and Accountant Isori Kei. (First High's Accountant also comprised the "supervisor" role and was traditionally appointed by the President.)

In reality, Azusa privately offered Tatsuya the role of Vice President. Of course, Tatsuya immediately turned her down, but the one who fought against this even more fiercely than himself was the new Chairperson for the Public Moral Committee, Kanon.

Her words were, "If Shiba-kun left, then the board's paperwork simply can't be finished".

Kanon directly pronounced this declaration in front of Azusa and Tatsuya, but when he heard this, Tatsuya was "flabbergasted."

By all rights, he was on active duty and not a pencil pusher.

Scratch that, technically, all members of the Public Moral Committee were on active duty, and were all responsible for doing paperwork.

That was how Mari wrote it on the transfer papers she handed to Kanon.

Tatsuya personally recorded the documentation, so there could have been no mistake.

However, Azusa nodded seriously at Kanon's announcement.

Tatsuya had a headache brewing at the "misunderstanding" of these two upperclassmen. Still, even without Tatsuya's thoughts on the matter, Azusa pressed for Tatsuya to join the Student Council despite Kanon's resistance. To state it plainly, she didn't have the confidence to hold Miyuki at bay without Tatsuya, but it wasn't like Miyuki could leave the Student Council either.

Tatsuya's head was seriously starting to hurt now.

In the end, they completely disregarded the person in question as Azusa and Kanon hammered out a compromise. Tatsuya would remain with the Public Moral Committee until the end of the school year, and would transfer to the Student Council in April. To the end, they never sought Tatsuya's opinion...

(...My head hurts just thinking about that.)

The moment he said, "...just joined the Student Council," he remembered what happened a year ago and the headache associated with it.

Instinctively, he followed the gaze on him and found Miyuki watching him with concerned eyes.

Mentally sighing at his sister's sensitivity, Tatsuya visually signaled for her not to worry and moved his chopsticks again.

◊ ◊ ◊

"Onii-sama, are you here?"

After school, Tatsuya visited the reference room in the basement of the library. Hearing his sister call out to him, he pulled himself out of the world of numbers and data and returned to reality.

"Miyuki, I'm over here."

Tatsuya raised his head from the terminal he was reading and waved Miyuki over.

Wireless communication was impossible in this reference room. Not only would the walls absorb the majority of the electronic waves, there were also signal dampeners in place.

The goal, of course, was to prevent data theft.

This reference room contained information deemed unsuitable to be published, highly dangerous materials, or papers containing ideas and concepts that went against mainstream beliefs and could easily influence students negatively. These documents were physically stored in the magic universities before transporting digital copies here and stored in independent databases separated from the outside world. In theory, the files could be freely accessed, but removing them was absolutely forbidden. Of course, making private copies of these protected files was also forbidden.

Given the nature of the materials in question, the overwhelming majority was not pertinent to class, very few individuals actually used this resource. It was more appropriate to say that the usual volume of traffic was zero. However, in the past half a month, Tatsuya had set a new record for visiting the reference room.

Even though he waved Miyuki over, Tatsuya didn't leave the terminal. Miyuki understood why, so she walked over to Tatsuya's side.

"What are you looking at?"

Arriving at Tatsuya's side, Miyuki was drawn towards the screen he was gazing at and couldn't help but ask.

"Data records on Alexandrite."

In regards to Miyuki's question, Tatsuya replied without hesitation just as usual. No matter how he treated others, Tatsuya had nothing to hide from Miyuki. The subject of this investigation was also something that Miyuki was well versed in.

"Have you been looking for alchemical documents this entire time...?"

Right now, he hadn't divulged the connection between that topic and the purpose behind it to Miyuki, hence her current state of confusion.

"I want to understand the basis behind alchemy, but just the nature and creation process of the 'Philosopher's Stone.' Of course, there are plenty of documents citing the creation of a Philosopher's Stone as the definitive goal in alchemy."

"Transmutation... You're not thinking of challenging this area, are you."

For modern magic, transmutation currently remains an impossible task. While Flying-Type Magic was also once thought to be impossible, the actualization of transmutation exists on a completely different level of difficulty. Miyuki once heard Tatsuya say, "There is a very low possibility of actually achieving true transmutation."

"Of course not."

At Miyuki's question, Tatsuya laughed lightly in denial.

"In the narrowest sense, the Philosopher's Stone differs from the medicinal field and is the catalyst that transmutes poor metals to precious metals.

Right now, what material the catalyst is created from is secondary to its purpose as the tool to activate spells."

"If the Philosopher's Stone is a catalyst similar to the catalysts we use on a daily basis, then......"

"According to legend, transmuting poor metals to precious metals is only possible with the Philosopher's Stone. If no other magical process is required to achieve transmutation beyond possessing the stone, then the conclusion must be that the Philosopher's Stone possesses the ability to store Magic Sequences."

"Storing Magic Sequences?"

Seeing Miyuki stare at him wide-eyed in shock, the smile had long since faded from Tatsuya's face.

"Since many Magicians were invited to test Flying-Type Magic before it hit the market, even if there were some adjustments, the actualization of Flying-Type Magic already established the key for the continuous activation of Gravity Control-Type Magic."

Tatsuya released the Activation Sequence for Flying-Type Magic at no charge precisely to take advantage of this point. General consensus stated that once a party obtained access to a spell, they would immediately put it to use. Especially for devices already equipped with this Activation Sequence, the sooner it could be obtained the better. Besides the requests to FLT for Flying-Type equipment from corporations within the country, countries with friendly relations like the USNA, also made similar petitions. From the observation data, FLT received copious research data from many high class Magicians using Gravity-Type magic, which eventually fell into Tatsuya's hands.

"Gravity Control-Type Magic is a viable solution to sustainable nuclear fusion, but that becomes meaningless if a Magician is required to constantly supply magic. This would be like saying a Magician is a component of the nuclear fusion reactor and simply a weapon component."

Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic was one of the three great hurdles in Gravity-Type Magic leading up to the development of a thermonuclear fusion reactor. Here, Tatsuya was raising one possible solution to this problem.

This was too deep for Miyuki to comprehend completely, but she got the overall gist of what her brother was suggesting.

"Magicians are essential for the initial activation, but, at the same time, the system doesn't completely bind the Magician in place. To achieve this, magic needs to be sustained at a rate that can be calculated by days as a unit, which requires a method of storing the Magic Sequence that can sustain magic without having a Magician present. While both options are worth pursuing, from a safety perspective the latter is the more viable proposal."

"So that's why you are researching the Philosopher's Stone."

The general consensus that Tatsuya spoke of wasn't just a pipe dream, a point that he was perfectly well aware of. Thus, he felt slightly awkward when Miyuki adopted an utterly trusting expression as she nodded deeply at his words. With that feeling, Tatsuya changed topics.

"Speaking of which, Miyuki, did you need me for something?"

Even though this question was phrased to cover his own discomfiture, his remark was dead on the money.

"Ah! That's it! Onii-sama, Ichihara-senpai was looking for you. She wanted to talk to you about next month's thesis competition."

"Where is she?"

Tatsuya didn't ask for any specifics as he shut down the reading terminal. That being said, he bore some part of the responsibility for leading the conversation into another direction, so he was in no position to ask that, especially given their lack of time.

"She's in the preparation room for Magic Geometry. She said she would wait for you near Tsuzura-sensei's desk."

"Got it. Sorry about this, Miyuki, but please return the keys for me."

"Please leave that to me."

Tatsuya rose from the chair and handed the keycard to Miyuki. Miyuki happily took the keycard from her Onii-sama like a delighted puppy that was bestowed a prize.

Seeing his sister reveal that sort of expression without a hint of shame, Tatsuya didn't choose to reprimand or complain as his face softened. Objectively speaking, he was forced to admit that he spoiled his sister too much.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tsuzura Kazuo, the Magic Geometry instructor for the National Magic University affiliated First High, was responsible for technical skills instruction for Year 2 Class B. He was a visiting professor lent to First High from the National Magic University.

As a prodigy who obtained the rank of professor in the Magic University at a young age, he drew considerable spite for his overly free attitude towards research, and was forcibly relocated to the school to "earn some experience as an educator."

Still, the man in question didn't mind in the slightest and was even overjoyed that he could now "pursue research, unfettered, and without further concerns." Precisely because of his personality, not only did he adopt a cold attitude to the friction between Course 1 and 2 students, he even wished for the students to completely abandon this differentiation altogether — except he may have neglected the students' own opinions.

His family hailed from one of the Hundred Families, and was granted the right to use a number in the Tsuzura name (Tsu refers to twenty). The Tsuzura and Isori Families both produced many exceptional researchers who freely exchanged research findings and remained national authorities in the field. Even Hattori's favored Compound Magic bore fruit after tutelage under Tsuzura-sensei.

...That was Tatsuya's impression of Tsuzura-sensei.

By the numbers, Tsuzura-sensei was undoubtedly an oddball. Regardless of whether this was true or false — Tatsuya was quickly about to experience the man's true face.

By the time Tatsuya reached the preparation room for Magic Geometry, Tsuzura-sensei was the only instructor present.

Most likely because they felt ill at ease in this room, Tatsuya thought.

The instructors hired by this school were all exceptionally talented.

Of course these people also took great pride in their personal abilities, but when compared to a prodigy who earned his position as the assistant professor in the Magic University during his twenties, anyone's confidence would take a hit. The more someone relied on their personal talent, the more they felt pressured by someone who displayed an even greater talent and ability.

He could sympathize with that feeling; except this feeling manifested in areas other than magic.

Setting aside whether Tatsuya's speculation was correct, it remained an undeniable truth that there were no other instructors present save Tsuzura.

The three people waiting for him in the Magic Geometry preparation room were Tsuzura, Suzune, and Isori.

"You know about the thesis competition hosted by the Magic Association held at the end of the month, correct?"

After exchanging greetings, Tsuzura cut to the chase.

"I am unfamiliar with the details."

At this conservative answer that held something back, Tsuzura nodded slightly.

"The Thesis Competition isn't as conspicuous as the Nine Schools Competition, so it's not surprising that a Year 1 student like yourself remains ignorant of the details. Likewise, in terms of numbers, the Nine Schools Competition requires a large body of 52 members to participate, while the Thesis Competition only needs a small team of three."

The sheer difference in numbers may be shocking, but after calmly taking into account this only involved writing a thesis and its subsequent presentation, they simply didn't need very many people for this task. If all they needed was extra hands to help develop the props for the report, anyone on campus would do, so they wouldn't be specifically invited to join the team. Too many chiefs in one building would actually make it harder to get things done.

The fact that only three students from the entire school were selected came as a small surprise, but was well within the limits of common sense, Tatsuya ruminated.

"Now, then onto the main subject. Shiba-kun, can we count on you to represent First High in this year's Thesis Competition?"

Naturally, Tatsuya wasn't able to respond immediately. After all, this question more or less came out of the blue.

"...You want me to join?"

Even though Tsuzura's words left little room for mistake, Tatsuya couldn't help but ask back on reflex.

The "National High School Magic Theory Thesis Competition," hosted by the Japanese Magic Association.

Despite the name implying all high schools in the country, in reality the only high schools providing official education in magic theory were the nine high schools affiliated with the magic university, so this was really a competition between those nine schools. If the Nine Schools Competition was a "practical" contest, then the Thesis Competition was undoubtedly the "literary" complement.

"Exactly, you."

This slightly polite tone was probably his personality coming into play. Tsuzura adopted a dramatic pose as he nodded in reply.

"Originally, we planned to have Ichihara-san and Isori-kun, as well as Hirakawa-san from Year 3 Class C... Unfortunately, Hirakawa-san has hit a rough patch recently, and even submitted a withdraw petition last week. The good news is that we managed to persuade her otherwise, but she's still in no condition to compete now. Thus, we came to you."

Tatsuya was vaguely familiar with the name Hirakawa from Year 3 Class C.

The technician responsible for CAD calibration in the sabotaged Mirage Bat event of the Nine Schools Competition for Kobayakawa seemed to be a Year 3 female student named Hirakawa.

"But why pick a Year 1 student like myself? Aren't the representatives decided by the Thesis Selection Committee?"

Tatsuya finally recalled the rumor spreading around the start of June regarding the selection of the thesis team.

Since that was during the last stages leading up to the development of Flying-Type Magic, he didn't have the spare time to devote to other details, especially scenarios that might drag him into the limelight, so he quickly forgot about it.

"After taking into consideration that the report preparations need to be finished simultaneously, you are the best candidate. Ichihara-san will share the details."

After supplying a simplistic answer to Tatsuya's question, Tsuzura swiftly left the room.

At the time, Tatsuya never agreed to this proposal. Apparently, the rumors that he didn't care about students' opinions were true. Nevertheless, Tatsuya didn't appear to possess the power to veto this decision. Originally, he thought he was only being called in to help collect data, but that appeared to be a miscalculation. Still, no matter how he complained, that wasn't going to help his current situation. In order to understand the situation, Tatsuya turned back to Suzune.

"I was the one who recommended Shiba-kun. I rejected all the other substitutes."

(Ugh, rejected means...)

In response to Tatsuya's inquiring glance, Suzune dropped this bombshell.

"...Surely every applicant spent considerable time and effort in their respective proposals, so I imagine a lot of people would be put out that someone like me, who didn't even submit an application, was selected. Think about the people who were slightly behind Ichihara-senpai, Isori-senpai, and Hirakawa-senpai, and what they would think."

"Sekimoto-kun is out of the question. He's not suited for this task."

Tatsuya didn't have anyone in mind as he voiced his objection, but Suzune immediately launched into comment that bordered on a personal attack.

"Speaking of Sekimoto, are you referring to Sekimoto Isao-senpai from the Public Moral Committee?"

In order to prevent this from actually descending to that level, Tatsuya intentionally verified his identity.

"Hm, yeah... He and I come from radically different directions."

As expected, Suzune simply felt that she went too far and reined herself in, as Tatsuya had hoped.

At this time, Isori interjected into their conversation.

"As sensei said, though the thesis composition and report preparation are done by a team of three; if all three are split by differing opinions, then they would never agree on the thesis's direction, so it is integral that the task is split between one primary writer and two assistants. On this point, our school has decided that Ichihara-senpai will be the primary writer."

At Isori's explanation, Tatsuya nodded his head in agreement on two points. Differentiating between primary and supporting parties was mandatory, just as appointing the Year 3 student Suzune to be the primary also made sense.

"In other words... I am more suitable for the topic that Ichihara-senpai has in mind?"

That was the most likely possibility, given their current conversation, but what exactly allowed her to make that call? Plainly, Tatsuya had yet to attach his name to any thesis or dissertation.

"My thesis topic is the 'possibility of developing a Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear fusion reactor'."

Tatsuya's eyes widened at Suzune's words.

"Indeed, this is the same as Shiba-kun's research topic."

While he felt that a high school student using "research topic" was a little overkill, it was true that sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear fusion reactor was also one of the objectives Tatsuya was pursuing. On top of that, he was still playing this close to the chest, so he shouldn't have raised this with anyone else yet...

"...I see. The one spying on us at the time was Ichihara-senpai."

"I dislike the term spying. Please refer to this as watching with interest."

This far surpassed mere observation and bordered on outright eavesdropping, but Tatsuya didn't make an issue of it.

During the incident with the anti-magic terrorist cell in April, Tatsuya had detected someone watching his two interactions with Mibu Sayaka, but he didn't seek to identify the observer. Since the results spoke for themselves, there was no point making a fuss over this now.

"There are less than three weeks until the official commencement of the Thesis Competition. I believe that the only one who can provide adequate assistance now would be Shiba-kun, who also has a vested interest on the topic."

"Did you ever entertain the possibility...that I was just using that as an example with Mibu-senpai?"

"I believe I am a sufficient judge of character to think otherwise."

Tatsuya mentally and physically smiled in a wry manner at how highly he was esteemed.

"I understand. Since I stand to benefit as well, allow me to render my assistance."

On one hand, Tatsuya wasn't joking about the benefits on his end. On the other hand, Tatsuya was intrigued by whether Suzune's proposal could actually solve one of the Three Great Puzzles, which would be all the better if his own design could be of use in some way.

"Then, what should I do now?"

"First, I would like to explain the Thesis Competition in detail. I hope Isori-kun has no objections, seeing as you've already heard all this."

"No problem. You go ahead, Ichihara-senpai."

Using her eyes to thank Isori, who had nodded slightly in assent, Suzune removed three portable blackboards from the retractable shelf and handed each of them one, keeping one for herself.

Portable blackboards were electric papers with wireless communication that allowed the user to view magnified presentation materials from the size of a normal piece of paper with one hand, without resorting to projectors in small conference rooms. Naturally, the frames contained color, but the display for texts and documents often utilized white letters on a black background, which was why the term "blackboard" was used.

Suzune attached her own data terminal to the blackboard and brought up the handbook for the Thesis Competition.

"As Shiba-kun surmised, the Thesis Competition is a platform to disseminate the research findings from Magic Theory and Magic

Engineering at the high school level. Not only does this publicize the fruits of high school education, some of the students will also get the opportunity to present their research findings to the world at large. In addition, representatives from the Department of Magic Research will be on hand, and any thesis recorded into the Magic Encyclopedia will be adopted by the universities and corporations as well."

Tatsuya observed the data streaming from the screen as he listened to Suzune's voice.

"Usually, the date is set for the last Sunday each October. The location switches between Kyoto and Yokohama. The reason is, supposedly, because the main HQ for the Japanese Magic Association is located in Kyoto, while its primary branch in the Kantou region is in Yokohama. This year, the event will be held in the Yokohama International Conference Center."

Tatsuya mentally ran through the calendar. Thankfully, he had nothing planned for the last Sunday in October, which was October 30th.

"Only individuals who were recommended by the magic high schools affiliated with the National Magic University or passed the thesis preliminaries in each school are allowed to attend. Currently, there is no precedent for someone to present their findings without being recommended. While the rules open the Magic Theory Thesis Competition to all high school students in the nation, this is the reason why so far this has been exclusively for magic high schools."

Hearing Suzune's explanation, Tatsuya couldn't help but add in a few words of surprise.

"So there's no precedent for a team to advance without receiving a school recommendation?"

"...Shiba-kun. I think it's harder for normal high school students to compose a thesis that can be delivered in 30 minutes than it is for them to appear in Monolith Code or Mirage Bat."

"Isori-kun is correct. Even from our perspective, without the aid from the Student Council and Club Groups, there's no way we can do it with just the three of us."

Tatsuya, who was used to writing technical guides, mentally murmured "Is that so?", but didn't verbalize his disagreement.

"The topic is up to us, but under the obvious condition that it shall not run counter to the public good and morality. Two years ago, a student proposed the theoretical development of a magic that could replace weapons of mass destruction, and was quickly censored by inspectors ahead of time."

"Was someone seriously that audacious..."

Isori's eyes widened as he groaned at that. This must be the first time he heard of such a thing.

Tatsuya understood what he meant. At the same time, he who was capable of wielding magic that surpassed weapons of mass destruction was in no position to point fingers at that particular student. However, just as he was inwardly mocking himself, another question floated into his head.

"...Censored ahead of time by the inspectors implies that particular thesis wasn't publicized, correct? Since that paper remained under wraps, how did Ichihara-senpai learn about this?"

Tatsuya didn't even think twice before asking that question, which for some reason cast an awkward silence over the group.

Suzune unconsciously turned away with a complex and miserable expression on her face.

No, if you don't want to answer; these words were on Tatsuya's lips when she sighed and replied back.

"...The one who wrote that paper was our school's Student Council President from three terms ago."

(Holy... Did our school have that kind of character...)

Hearing Suzune's explanation, Tatsuya could only marvel in silence. Since the Thesis Competition was held right after the new Student Council session began, and Suzune joined the brass during the latter half of her first year, it was hardly surprising that she was privy to these details. Given Suzune's current facial expression, evidently this previous Student Council President had many other "legendary" deeds.

"[Ahem...] Owing to that precedent, all final drafts, materials, reports, and blueprints must be turned over to the Magic Association ahead of time."

Next to Suzune who had intentionally cleared her throat, Isori seemed to comprehend something as he nodded, possibly because this was the first time he heard all the details.

"The deadline is the Sunday two weeks from now. Though the materials have to be submitted to the Kantou branch of the Magic Association, the school will take responsibility for that. Taking into account the time Tsuzura-sensei needs to examine the contents, ideally we should have everything done by next week Wednesday."

Even if they could finish the report preparation after turning in their materials, that left only ten days to compose the thesis itself. Given the remaining time, this was indeed a tight schedule. Still, why did they need Tsuzura to look it over? There should be many instructors on campus with a wealth of experience who were old hands at devising textbooks for magic education.

At this question that could not be verbalized (as insulting as it was to Tsuzura-sensei), Isori shrewdly answered aloud.

"Tsuzura-sensei is the instructor responsible for this year's competition. Not only does he have to help out with the preparations for the Thesis Competition, he also has to deal with troublesome tasks like preparations for magic experiments. Generally, these things are left for younger teachers to do."

"Despite his youth, Tsuzura-sensei is an extremely capable individual. We are very fortunate that we are able to receive instruction that far surpasses what we would normally receive in class."

Doubly so for a Course 2 student, like himself, that normally has no chance of being personally instructed by the faculty. Not that Tatsuya actually said this.

Since the two of them — forget surpass, half the student body wasn't qualified for actual instruction — had conveniently failed to notice this, there was no need to remind them again.

After detailing a few specific areas that demanded special attention, Suzune's explanation drew to a close.

Chapter 2

Modern short distance public transportation was developed along the lines of carpooling, with large scale public transportation being replaced by smaller systems that accommodated fewer individuals.

Thirty years ago, this plan started spreading among the large metropolises as well as 80% of the medium sized cities and suburbs. The remaining 20% utilized private cars and had no need for public transportation.

In terms of going to school or work, large buses and cable cars that could transport large amounts of people had gone out of style, so the scene where high school students took the bus to and from school has almost become non-existent.

While Tatsuya really only went to school accompanied by Miyuki, he still shared the walk from the bus stop to the school with his friends. Even though he arrived later than usual to school, the usual crowd was still on hand waiting for him.

The predominant itinerary involved a simple walk to school, but sometimes they would make a quick detour to a cafe or fast food restaurant. Along the approximately one kilometer path to school, there were countless stores that boasted dining, books, school supplies, clothes, and especially materials related to magic education. Students and teachers from First High were not the only ones to frequent this area, since many customers took the tram from far away to come and shop here.

Within one of the more orthodox cafes where they were frequent fliers, eight people were sitting together.

"Eh? Tatsuya's been selected as one of the representatives for the Thesis Competition?"

Today's detour was because Mikihiko asked why Tatsuya was summoned to the Magic Geometry lab. Seeing Mikihiko burning with questions while they were waiting for the waitress, Tatsuya couldn't help but notice a side to his friend as he briefly elaborated on the details.

Hence Mikihiko's reaction was embodied by the previous comment.

Since he had already told Miyuki and Honoka when he picked them up from the Student Council Room yesterday, there were five people including Mikihiko who sat there with stunned expressions.

"Wait, I thought we only send three representatives from the entire school to the Thesis Competition."

"Yep."

At Mizuki's wide-eyed question, Tatsuya calmly replied with a decisive answer. Their two expressions were like night and day.

"Just a 'yep'...... Tatsuya-kun is completely lackadaisical about this."

Mizuki was struck speechless while Erika stared blankly. On the other side, Leo supplied an amused smile.

"For Tatsuya, that would be only natural."

"There's never been a case where we sent a Year 1 student out for the Thesis Competition."

"Not like it's impossible either, eh? Even the faculty can't ignore the genius who invented a brand new magic among us."

Hearing Shizuku's counter argument, Leo smiled and added a rebuttal of his own.

"Let's stop it there with the genius talk."

Rather than being embarrassed by that title, Tatsuya felt an irritation like someone poking him with a needle.

"Tatsuya-san really dislikes people calling him a genius......"

"Because that term is too casual."

At Honoka's amazed comment that was neither mocking nor filled with ulterior meanings, Miyuki replied in place of Tatsuya.

Tatsuya could only chuckle wryly at his sister's reply, though he had to admit she was right on the money.

"No, that's still incredible!"

Likely noticing the mood taking a turn for the worse, Mikihiko quickly chimed in to restore the balance.

"The winning thesis from the competition will be published annually in 'Super Nature', while a considerable amount of attention is still directed towards Second Place and below."

"Super Nature" is a British research journal that is held to be the highest authority on modern magic. Unfortunately, the journal also contained themes on dictatorship that were inappropriate for high school students. Fortunately, everyone here who had read the journal, including Mikihiko, Tatsuya, and Miyuki, were all quite familiar with the name.

"Ah, but...... There isn't a whole lot of time left."

Mikihiko's euphoric mood swiftly turned to worry as he stated this.

Shouldn't Mikihiko also pay attention to these sudden mood swings? Tatsuya thought in surprise. Regardless, he kept these thoughts to himself as he nodded at Mikihiko's question.

"We have exactly 9 days until the school turns in our paper."

"That's it!? That's right around the corner!"

"There's no problem at all. At the end of the day, I'm only in a supporting role. The lead writer has been working on this since before summer vacation."

Seeing Honoka's electrified expression, Tatsuya reassured her with a smile as he waved his hand a little. At Tatsuya's answer, Honoka relaxed into a "You're right" expression and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Even so, the fact remains that this is a pressing deadline. Did something unexpected happen?"

"One of the supporting upperclassmen's physical condition suddenly worsened."

Miyuki wrinkled her brows as she queried Tatsuya, who maintained his earlier smile as he replied with a simple answer. Even though he didn't cut into the heart of the matter, there really was nothing to hide even if pressed.

Yet, Miyuki didn't seem wholly satisfied with Tatsuya's overly simplistic answer.

"That's quite unfortunate, but even so this is certainly a last minute change."

The reason apparently wasn't why this situation occurred, but a mood issue.

"Indeed, even if the entire thesis had to be done from scratch, Onii-sama would still be the best candidate."

Nonetheless, given that Tatsuya's situation had already turned into reality, Miyuki was only looking for a reason to convince herself, which was perfectly in tune with her character. In Tatsuya's eyes, even though Miyuki's comment was fairly accurate, she was still thinking too highly of herself with this unconditional acceptance.

"That's not entirely the case. We would have quite the conundrum on our hands if I was utterly unfamiliar with the field of Ichihara-senpai's topic, but fortunately that isn't the case."

Thus, Tatsuya adopted a "smile and deny" tactic, but Miyuki didn't seem very happy with her brother's stance. Just as she was thinking of an appropriate rejoinder, a new question sprouted out from beside her.

"Hey, so what is the topic?"

Curious, Leo leaned forward as he asked this question. Despite the fact that all the young ladies watched him coldly with eyes that clearly said "Would you understand even if he told you?", the man asking the question and the one answering him both ignored them.

"Technical Difficulties and Solutions to Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor."

"......I can't even imagine that."

The questioner immediately retorted back, a prompt reflection of his current predicament.

"......That's quite the grandiose topic. Isn't that one of the 'Three Great Puzzles in Weight Systematic Magic'?" Mikihiko groaned with a complex expression. To his side, "Since Tatsuya-san was asked to join, I thought the thesis would be related to CAD processes."

Mizuki expressed her thoughts on the matter.

"Ah, I thought so too."

"Kei-senpai is also a member...... I think that this topic may be simply too difficult to have a chance at victory."

Shizuku and Erika shared Mizuki's opinion. Apparently, his friends were concerned on his behalf that this topic would prove too challenging for Tatsuya and high school students in general.

Which made perfect sense, since the Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor was not labeled one of the Three Great Puzzles just for nothing. In this situation, Tatsuya could only smile and muddle through.

However, among all the smiling faces, only Miyuki wasn't really smiling.

Her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Only she, who understood the significance of Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactors, could truly appreciate how serious her brother was.

◊ ◊ ◊

The siblings split from their friends at the station. They returned home to find a small limousine parked in their parking spot, which prompted the two of them to exchange a glance.

Tatsuya stepped forward and opened the door.

Seeing the rare designer label high heels in the threshold, Tatsuya gently cradled Miyuki's shoulders as she stood there in utter silence with a stiff expression on her face.

As he supported Miyuki and stepped through the door, a light tapping of slippers rapidly approaching could be heard.

"—Welcome back. The two of you are always on such good terms."

Hearing these mocking tones, Tatsuya swiftly narrowed his eyes as his hand that was holding his sister's shaking shoulders tightened their grip a fraction.

"It's been quite a while, Sayuri-san."

Tatsuya's chilly voice was a perfect match for his cool gaze.

This time, it was the petite woman who welcomed them who shook a little.

"Hm, hm. Well, that's because I always wanted to be close to the office."

"Is that so."

Tatsuya nodded curtly at their stepmother who hadn't stepped foot in this house for 9 months — in the siblings' eyes, she was "their father's second wife" — Shiba Sayuri.

Despite coming home, this household did not possess her room or bedding since after her marriage to their father, she had settled down with him in a suite in an upscale apartment complex five minutes from FLT headquarters and dwelt in married bliss together. Tatsuya only intended to slightly needle Sayuri for the fact that she had never lived here after marrying their father and her usage of this location as home.

Seeing their father's second wife's expression darken at the sarcasm, Miyuki actually composed herself. With her brother's arm still around her, she slightly shifted around, utterly ignoring any other gazes on her as she pressed closer to Tatsuya's slightly lowered face.

Normally, even with just the two of them, Miyuki would never commit such an embarrassing action that was wholly incompatible with her image. At this point, Miyuki had completely entered a state where bystanders held no meaning.

"I shall begin preparations for dinner immediately, Onii-sama. Anything in particular you would like?"

"Anything you make will be fine. There's no need to hurry, so you best get changed first."

Tatsuya didn't even bother to glance at Sayuri, instead devoting his entire attention to Miyuki. At her brother's response, Miyuki revealed an ecstatic smile.

"I understand, though I wonder if there's something you had in mind. So long as it's Onii-sama's wish, Miyuki is willing to do anything."

"Hey, don't get too worked up."

Tatsuya lightly poked her forehead before Miyuki shrugged her head down and lightly sprang up to the second floor.

"So, what may I do for you today?"

Once Miyuki's figure disappeared, Tatsuya reopened the conversation with Sayuri, who seemed stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Afterwards, he stepped quickly into the living room and took a seat on a nearby sofa, and once again called out to the hesitant Sayuri.

"Could we get a move on, since I would like to finish before my sister returns."

Sayuri creased her brows at these curt words, but she still took a seat opposite Tatsuya.

"Looks like you two still aren't very welcoming towards me."

As if realizing that further acting was pointless, Sayuri's attitude abruptly changed when she sat down.

Completely heedless of Tatsuya's gaze, she set one leg over another and leaned back on the sofa.

Her casual clothes devoid of any makeup was likely her researcher's calling showing through, so Tatsuya didn't have to worry about where to leave his eyes. Of course, even if Sayuri was wearing a tight miniskirt, Tatsuya likely wouldn't bat an eyelid.

"Miyuki may think that way. After all, it's only natural for her to be somewhat resentful if her father remarried less than half a year after her mother died. Even though she may act like an adult, she's really just a 15 year old young girl."

"......And you?"

"I am incapable of such an emotional reaction. That was the way I was forged."

"......Well, forget it, regardless of whether that's true or not, that's no longer in my hands. Even so, if we were to talk about that, I hope that you can seriously listen to him, since it was only half a year for you two, but a whole 16 years for me."

Despite her youthful appearance, she was actually the same age as their father. Tatsuya was contemplating these rude concepts like the public enemy of women.

She, Shiba Sayuri, was originally known as Furuha Sayuri and was Shiba Tatsurou's lover before his marriage with Yotsuba Miya. Rumor had it that the Yotsuba interposed to seize a prized genetic advantage and forcibly cut them apart. Tatsuya could read between the lines of her hatred even if she didn't verbalize them.

Still, that was an issue between her and their birth parents and was unrelated to the siblings. Since she had maintained an affair with their father while Miya was still alive, she would receive no pity from him.

"So, what's the occasion that brought you all the way out here?"

Sayuri originally intended to naturally drift into the main subject, so Tatsuya's direct inquiry caught her off guard and finally shook off the unnatural vibes around their conversation.

"......Then, let's cut right to the chase. The company labs require your assistance. If possible, we hope you will drop out from high school."

"Impossible. During Miyuki's enrollment at First High, I am unable to fulfill my mission as a guardian if I am not a student at First High."

A ridiculous demand warranted a flat refusal from Tatsuya.

"Even if you're not a student, other guardians could be made available."

"There is a shortage of Magicians in every field. Even the Yotsuba Family would be hard pressed to replace a guardian on such short notice."

"In other words, you are the finest candidate?"

"When only restricted to Miyuki's protection, that is indeed the case."

This was a conversation that had occurred multiple times in the past.

Whew, Sayuri heaved a great sigh that didn't seem theatrical.

"......I doubt any company has enough surplus to allow someone as talented as you, to simply play around."

"Play around? I do believe I have made powerful contributions to the company as well. A few days ago, the company received an order from the USNA Navy for a large quantity of Flying-Type devices, which boosted the quarterly profits by 20% compared to last quarter."

At Tatsuya's combative words, Sayuri couldn't help but reveal a regretful expression.

That was because she had no rebuttal for Tatsuya's words.

It was public knowledge that FLT originally wasn't a manufacturer for CAD products, but a provider for spare parts used for Magic Engineering. Their ascent to the pinnacle of CAD development and production around the globe was largely in thanks to the Silver Series and Tatsuya by extension. With the introduction of Flying-Type Devices, FLT had become the innovator that pioneered the next paradigm shift in the world of Specialized CADs. For Sayuri, who originally entered the company as a researcher and was elevated to management despite having no major accomplishments to her name, this was a towering feat that rendered jealousy meaningless.

Still, those were Sayuri's personal feelings on the matter. As she replied with an "Ah, is that so," she also brought up the reason why she couldn't leave just yet.

"......At the very least, can you help analyze this item for me?"

Sayuri pulled out a large jewel box from her bag and carefully opened the lid.

There was a half-translucent crimson crystal in the middle.

"......A relic from the Magatama class."

From the perspective of Magic Researchers, "relics" were OOParts that contained a magical nature that had unidentifiable artificial components, yet formed naturally under highly challenging conditions. For example, "Antinite" that contained "Cast Jamming" could be classified as a type of relic.

Also, true relics — such as a Magatama — like this one usually never fell into the hands of a researcher.

"Where was this unearthed?"

"I do not know."

"I see, this came from the JSDF."

Given its status as the preeminent domestic manufacturer, FLT received many contracts from the military.

"In terms of analysis, don't tell me you're asking for something preposterous like duplicating this Magatama, are you?"

Seeing Sayuri's stiff expression, Tatsuya could only sigh.

"Who came up with such a reckless decision? Don't you have any idea how ridiculous it is to attempt to synthesize relics with modern science and technology?"

OOParts is short for "Out Of Place Artifacts". Essentially, these were "items that did not belong in this time" and were "objects that exceeded the level of science from when it was unearthed" and were simply unable to be developed with technology at the time.

However, precisely because this was something that surpassed modern science, the greatly exaggerated term "relic" was used.

"......The JSDF demanded that we accept the task. Refusal was not an option."

Not like management's decision was impossible to comprehend. Not just FLT, corporations in the magic industry by nature served in the public sector and could be broadly painted as a war industry.

Only individuals with practical magic skills would purchase products of magic engineering like CADs, but Magicians held a much smaller share of the market than other industries.

Given the scarcity of Magicians, this was only to be expected.

Currently, the number of people in magic related fields or students studying magic at the high school and collegiate level totaled roughly 30,000 people.

In other words, even if every single one of them purchased a new CAD every year, the total turnover rate would still be 30,000. In reality, the duration time tended to be on the longer side since it was common practice for a Magician to own five or six CADs. Regardless, it didn't change the fact that the market remained quite narrow.

Also, based on the national policy of promoting magic, magic support devices needed to be sold at a low price. In practice, CAD prices were limited to a level well within the purchasing power of a normal household so they could purchase one for their child that was entering high school as a celebratory present. This sort of independent industry was hard to develop scale and design.

Thus, the nation heavily subsidized the magic industry.

For example, the nation subsidized 90% of CAD sales.

The products sold at the public level were 10% of the price used in exchanges between companies.

In addition, using research grants as an excuse, the nation paid large sums to private corporations each year for research.

Even the largest corporations in the field like Maximilian and Rozen were unable to deny their respective governments. That was the fate of magic industries.

"However, the JSDF should be aware of the meaning behind the relic label. So long as the item has been identified as a relic, they should know that artificial synthesis is no longer possible, so why make this ludicrous demand?"

There was a pregnant pause before Sayuri finally opened her mouth to respond.

"Recently, research has discovered that Magatama possesses the ability to store Magic Sequences."

Despite the hesitant answer, this was enough to bring a swift change to Tatsuya's expression.

"Has this been proven to be a fact?"

Suppressing the burning desire in his voice was the limit of Tatsuya's acting capabilities. Fortunately, Sayuri seemed to miss Tatsuya's profound interest in relics.

"It's still in the theoretical phase. Still, the military's movements have already produced fairly reliable observation data."

Tatsuya nodded gravely.

"If this is true, then there's no way the military would leave that alone, which is completely within reason."

Storage capacity for Magic Sequences was not restricted to only Tatsuya's goal. If Magic Sequence storage can be spread to the public level, autonomous and self-sustaining magic devices would no longer be a pipe dream. Even troops without Magicians could equip magic weapons. Since Magatamas had the power to store Magic Sequences, successful mass replication would provide a massive supply of magic weaponry.

"But given FLT's recent gains, there shouldn't be a need to take the road less traveled."

Given the project's importance, once accepting this task, a simple "cannot be done" would not suffice.

"The die has been cast."

"Even without any chance for success?"

Considering that the key to relic replication remained unknown, this was a colossal risk.

"We have a small chance. By using your magic, analysis is still possible."

Tatsuya couldn't help but laugh at Sayuri finally laying all her cards on the table. In the end, she wasn't here for his brain, but his unique ability.

Just as she always had.

"Even using my power does not guarantee successful replication. ......If you insist, then please send the specimen to the R&D Third Division. I drop by there on a regular basis."

In reality, this didn't really affect Tatsuya either way. While it was true that Tatsuya required additional insight on how to preserve Magic Sequences, his goal was only limited to grasping the methodology behind this. Magatama replication was only secondary, so he didn't want to overly burden the researchers in the office. The bottom line was that scheduling was difficult to come by on their part, so it's not like they could do whatever they pleased.

"..........."

However, this was not a proposal that Sayuri could stomach. Her position demanded that she take into account the departmental rivalries within FLT. The R&D Third Division simply couldn't win additional fame and recognition. Also, an infinitely more important and preposterous reason was that neither her nor her husband could afford to allow "Taurus Silver", Tatsuya himself, any more speaking power. Surely the other labs could surpass Tatsuya's achievements, right? Given Tatsuya's large following — to the point that a decisive majority of the Third Division sided with him, maybe their accomplishments would be put on his tab as well. (That was Sayuri's private suspicion.)

Unable to accept Tatsuya's proposal, Sayuri clenched her teeth.

"Or, would you prefer to leave the specimen here?"

Tatsuya's words provided a glimmer of hope for the conflicted Sayuri and became the impetus she seized upon to escape this quandary.

"There's no need!"

Nonetheless, rather than choosing to compromise, she chose to break off entirely. For her, under no condition would she allow the relic replication to occur away from the office — away from her ability to claim all credit for the accomplishment. Leaving the specimen behind was a ridiculous notion that was synonymous to allowing Tatsuya to pluck this prize from her hands. In actuality, she was the one who originally made the outrageous request to challenge something that "had no successful precedent", but the present Sayuri had lost all objectivity.

Her ire fully roused, Sayuri rose from her seat.

"I understand now. Seeking your assistance was a mistake in the first place!"

Placing the jewel box back into her bag, Sayuri departed in a huff.

As Sayuri swiftly walked down the hall, Tatsuya was literally right on her heels. By the time she reached the threshold and was putting on her shoes, Tatsuya adopted a tone typically reserved for customer service.

"Since you are carrying valuables, would you like me to accompany you to the station?"

"No need, I'll drive."

"As you wish. Do be careful."

Tatsuya was not displeased by his stepmother's barb and courteously bowed.

"Miyuki."

Tatsuya called out to her from the threshold. Wearing a sleeveless mini-dress, Miyuki timidly descended from the stairs.

Her pearly arms revealed a light pink that ran to her shoulders, a product of her own embarrassment at her attire rather than caused by cosmetics.

"Onii-sama, well...... I sincerely apologize for my childish behavior."

Despite her personal avowal of her childish behavior, in reality this was more like some sort of display of close affection. Naturally, Miyuki was ignorant of this point as she stood there with her skin bared before Tatsuya's eyes. No matter what she said, she surely must have put considerable thought into this charming display.

Tatsuya gently stroked his sister's face though she didn't dare to match his gaze before his fingertips dipped south towards the chin. Suddenly, his index finger swiftly tilted her face upwards.

This simple action caused Miyuki's enchantingly white skin to flush completely red from her shoulders to her bosom. Her silky long hair gently swayed as her eyes were filled with a dazzling luminescence for an altogether irresistible package.

"Uh, this......"

Their posture seemed to lead up to a kiss, forcing Miyuki to bashfully avert her eyes.

Yet Tatsuya's fingers once more stretched towards her face.

Mesmerized, Miyuki closed her eyes.

And then,

"—Ah!?"

A muffled cry of pain rang out for a short duration.

"W-What was that for?"

"Punishment."

Seeing his sister blush and fall back a step (a perfectly natural response to someone suddenly pinching her nose), Tatsuya smiled as he replied.

"Oh...... Onii-sama is a meanie."

Miyuki sulkily pouted and turned her face aside while maintaining her charming posture. At this, Tatsuya's expression softened as he continued to smile.

"I'm stepping out for a bit. Make sure to lock the doors until I return."

"Onii-sama?"

At her brother's mysterious instructions to watch the house, Miyuki's expression tightened as she inquired to the reason.

"I'm going to pursue a certain woman who lacks a sense of danger."

Tatsuya picked up the uniform coat he just took off as Miyuki frowned in displeasure.

"......Exactly how much trouble is that person planning on putting Onii-sama through."

"Unfortunately, I can't just leave her to her own devices. Sayuri is holding a relic that may hold the key to Magic Sequence storage."

Tatsuya removed his tie and handed it to Miyuki as he elaborated on the real motive behind his "pursuit".

Miyuki seemed to comprehend this somewhat but still crinkled her brows afterwards.

"If that's the case then there's nothing for it. Please be careful, Onii-sama."

Miyuki recalled their conversation after school in the reference room. She would not use her dislike of her father's lover to bar her brother's decisions. She did not say "don't go", nor did she say "there's no need to go", but merely removed Tatsuya's heavy coat from the hanger in silence.

After throwing on the coat with Miyuki's assistance, Tatsuya removed a pair of gloves and a helmet from the storage compartment in the threshold and pulled on a pair of riding boots. Tatsuya nodded to Miyuki, who had put her hands side by side in front of herself and bowed deeply to send him off, and said, "I'm off."

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In the speeding vehicle that was automatically directing itself, Sayuri felt an exhaustive pressure pound down on her like twice the weight of gravity.

If she had to say something, it would be a regretful "I still did it......"

After reaching the managerial level, she thought that she had already become accustomed to wheeling and dealing. However, she still heaved a depressed sigh at her headstrong and impulsive behavior.

In principle, the young man was by all rights her son, but every time she was before him she found it hard to maintain her composure.

She was perfectly well aware of the reason behind this.

Because he was the son of her rival.

Paired with an engineer's ability and achievements.

Complete with unreadable eyes and unfathomable emotions.

Under his eyes, she wasn't seen as a human being, but simply a specimen under a microscope and relegated to the status of an item.

Just the way he viewed his own role as a tool, but Sayuri was unaware of that.

What she did know was that this contract demanded his cooperation, but her own impatience had made this significantly more difficult. Silently, she redirected her gaze out the window and heaved a heavy sigh.

As she raised her eyes, she noticed that traffic had strangely decreased.

She hadn't seen any cars coming from the opposite direction since a while back,

And even though this was a residential sector, the hour wasn't too late yet.

Her inner frustration was submerged by a trace of unease.

She called up the screen for traffic information. The display informed her that other cars had been rerouted along a different path to avoid a stalled vehicle on the road.

Which was a legitimate reason in its own right, letting Sayuri let out a breath of relief.

Chasing Sayuri's vehicle through traffic on a large electric motorcycle, Tatsuya also noticed the drop in traffic.

The message he received through the headset in his helmet was the same information Sayuri saw on her display.

Nevertheless, Tatsuya did not find any benign news within.

The information that cars were rerouted due to a stalled vehicle wasn't suspicious in its own right.

Tatsuya had seen first hand exactly how difficult it was to infiltrate the traffic control system when he saw Sanada and Fujibayashi hacking into the system on the scene.

Still, Tatsuya wasn't optimistic enough to believe every single car was diverted from the road that led from Tatsuya's house to the station. That sort of thing only happened when multiple cars were stalled on the road.

It wasn't particularly difficult to identify vehicle locations within the control system.

Especially since commuter vehicles available for public transportation continuously broadcast signals to prevent thieves from using them as escape tools.

Likewise, identifying the signal wasn't any sort of classified secret.

Since he left the house, Tatsuya was already homing in on Sayuri's vehicle.

Finally catching sight of his stepmother's car, he also discovered another manually operated vehicle independent of traffic control that was tailing her.

A shrill alarm sounded from the vehicle's display.

The display informed her that a manually operated vehicle was closing in.

Yet, Sayuri wasn't overly concerned.

Even in this age, there still existed people who took pleasure in driving themselves.

As an engineer, she was aware that drivers could modify their cars to be independent of the traffic control system's influence.

Thus, she paid little heed to the car closing in from behind.

As such, Sayuri leaned back into her seat and switched off the piercing alarm.

Seeing the black manually operated car pick up speed, Tatsuya stepped on the gas as well. In terms of acceleration, Tatsuya's motorcycle had the edge.

Still, based on proximity and respective speed, the black manually operated car would reach Sayuri's vehicle first.

In reaction to the manually operated car that suddenly closed in instead of passing by, Sayuri's car activated its collision avoidance system.

Near her car that came to an emergency stop, two men descended from the manually operated car.

This was an overly brazen action along the streets with wireless surveillance systems. However, given the situation, the suspects were probably illegal aliens, since normal citizens and immigrants would immediately be identified from their images.

Tatsuya raised the lights to the max and pointed them at the two men trying to break open the car door.

Descending from the motorcycle with the lights still on, Tatsuya rushed towards the men.

Tatsuya pulled out the CAD in his chest pocket with his right hand while the men covered their faces to avert the light. A second later, one man used a pistol while the other sent his fists flying towards Tatsuya.

Under the light from the motorcycle, the man's fist wore a bronze ring that glimmered lightly on one finger.

From the ring, a shrill psionic noise could be heard.

This was magic interference waves known as "Cast Jamming" coming from the "Antinite".

One of them focused on nullifying enemy magic while the other used the gun to finish off the enemy.

Of course, if their opponent was any run of the mill Magician.

The muzzle was aimed at Tatsuya. The target was the heart, at a range where evasion was altogether impossible, and a clear killing intent could be felt.

Yet the man failed to squeeze the trigger.

Before he could do so, Tatsuya already hit the trigger on his CAD.

The pistol collapsed into pieces in the man's hands.

One of the men, or maybe even both of them, started yelling in excitement, but given the distance, he wasn't sure what they were saying. He could only hear the term "Cast Jamming", which likely signified their surprise that "Cast Jamming" had no effect, or maybe they were expressing their astonishment that the pistol was shattered despite the presence of magic interference waves.

Still, regardless of how it was, that was no longer Tatsuya's concern. Even if he was hindered in an unexpected way, his actions would not change. Tatsuya once more pulled the trigger.

The man who once held the gun let out a cry of pain and fell to the ground. He pressed his thigh and began rolling on the ground.

Next, the man with the ring pressed his shoulder. He couldn't contain his moans of pain and doubled over as he broke out into a cold sweat before losing consciousness. Since he was pierced by a force resembling tiny needles that annihilated skin, flesh, blood vessels, nerves, and bones, the sudden pain must have overcome his ability to stay conscious.

Decomposition Magic — Mist Dispersion could decompose any human body part.

So where on the human body would a piercing attack generate enough shock to surpass a man's consciousness?

Where must the attack land to cut off feeling from the four limbs?

Indifferent to whether it was his own flesh or that of others, Tatsuya was extremely knowledgeable on the matter.

He slipped around the two men on the ground and approached the black, manually operated vehicle.

Tatsuya kept his CAD aimed at the car, but didn't pull the trigger.

Hydrogen fueled cars contained the fuel in compressed states, so carelessly attacking would trigger a gigantic explosion. Of course, normally there are protocols to avoid ignition, but it was a fact that some chose to remove the safety features to create suicide attacks.

If Miyuki was present then there was no need to worry about an explosion, but unfortunately she was minding the house. The right side of the road was covered by a wide expanse of the river, but the left side was filled with residential buildings. Taking the nearby households into account, Tatsuya judged that he couldn't force the issue.

Strictly speaking, this decision was overly negligent.

Suddenly, killing intent mushroomed forth above him from the right.

Tatsuya took evasive action on reflex.

There wasn't even a hint of hesitation in his motion.

Even so, he could not avoid the bullet that flew at supersonic speed.

He felt a burning pain in his breast,

Where the bullet had pierced through his left breast.

The impact from the bullet caused his body to fly through the air.

The enemy's sniping attack was incredibly accurate.

Even if he avoided a fatal attack, the blow still pierced his lung.

Given how late he heard the gunshot, the attack must have been made from an extreme distance. If Tatsuya hadn't taken evasive action, the bullet would have pierced his heart.

Conservatively speaking, this was an incredibly skilled sniper.

Tatsuya used the inertia from the falling motion to roll and take cover behind Sayuri's car.

The wound from the attack had already healed itself. Normally, even fatal injuries would disappear in a flash so long as his magic was active.

Still, that did not mean he could not feel pain.

The extreme pain from the impact of the bullet as well as the bullet leaving his body still threw Tatsuya into a cold sweat.

However, this was not the time to focus on something like that.

Tatsuya needed to pinpoint his attacker's position.

Given the direction and angle of the attack as well as the placement of the surrounding buildings that could serve as obstacles, the sniper's location was probably one of the industrial buildings from across the river.

Roughly 1000 meters from his current position.

Taking into consideration that the bullet could easily penetrate the human body and open such a tiny hole, the weapon was probably using sabot rounds.

The car's exterior was made of synthetic wood, so this wasn't going to last very long as a cover.

The trickier part came from the fact that the sniper wasn't using magic.

No matter what sort of magic was used, there would be a trace of magic left behind that Tatsuya could use to swiftly ascertain his opponent's location.

However, if his opponent was strictly sticking to shooting, this distance made it much harder for him to rely on Elemental Sight.

The two men who had collapsed on the ground lightly floated in the air.

The car door on the black vehicle opened and rudely sucked their bodies inside.

It was a simple act to nullify the Move-Type Magic that was recovering the two men, but right now removing the sniper's threat was higher priority.

He re-examined the data from the bullet that went through his body.

Tatsuya ran data analysis again and went over the bullet data again.

Bodily fluids.

Physical resistance.

Effects from the wind.

Gravity.

Air compression at the time of the shot.

The variables from the bullet were compressed into a single message and returned to Tatsuya.

He identified the target's information at the time of attack.

Tatsuya turned back the clock and read the bullet's trajectory, the sniper's information and the very memory of the "world".

From present into the past.

Then,

From past into present.

Using the sniper's firing point as the origin, he searched the myriad, transient data within the "world" of the information dimension for the desired target.

Within his mind, Tatsuya locked in on the sniper's Eidos — separating that particular one from the masses the same way he always did.

He also knew that his opponent was aiming here and preparing to fire again.

The second shot hadn't arrived because the sniper was reloading and changing the armor penetration rounds used earlier to rounds that could penetrate objects that the enemy was taking cover behind, hence the huge delay.

Tatsuya saw through this because he held every scrap of data about this sniper in the palm of his hand.

He had to say he was quite fortunate.

As he thought this, Tatsuya activated the magic to completely decompose the human body.

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Ten minutes after the black car fled, Tatsuya judged that there was no further danger and stood up from behind the car.

Peeking into the car's interior, he found Sayuri had already fainted. Since the car hadn't activated after all this time, which was perfectly predictable, there was no need for concern.

Her body was surrounded by air bags on all sides, which served as a buffer all around her. This was an excellent example of the safety features kicking in to prevent the driver's body from suffering physical injury, as this arrangement could protect them from any type of shock.

In that case, she likely fainted due to the mental shock from this event.

At any rate, she was someone connected to the Yotsuba Family, so she should be able to endure some degree of incidents. Yet her current predicament looked just like an average person, right? Tatsuya couldn't help but ruminate on this.

Once the reusable air bags were tucked away, the automatic vehicle restarted itself.

Covering the slowly moving vehicle from behind, Tatsuya followed on his motorcycle.

By the time they reached the station, Sayuri had already regained consciousness. Her face was a little pale, but she displayed no sign of panic. Of course, Tatsuya was riding a motorcycle behind her during the entire trip, so he had no idea what expression was on her face anyway. After seeing her to the station, Sayuri forced Tatsuya to accept the box that contained the Magatama. Tatsuya felt that Sayuri's stubborn and relentless appearance exemplified her personality perfectly.

After Sayuri left, Tatsuya headed directly for the phone after returning home. He didn't use a mobile phone at the station for fear of eavesdroppers.

"Don't worry about the cameras on route. We've already started taking steps."

"Thank you very much, Major."

The phone was a direct line to the HQ of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

As someone who was forced to conceal his identity as one of the primary combatants for the Yotsuba Family within the Ten Master Clans as well as his alias as a Special Lieutenant within the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, the first order of business for Tatsuya was to ensure that his identity wasn't exposed by the cameras.

Tatsuya straightened and saluted Kazama's image on the display.

"Still, I must say that our opponents are behaving quite recklessly. Even though this isn't the heart of the city, they still fired within the city proper."

"While I cannot deny that I was overly careless, I must admit that our opponents are quite skilled."

"They did not use magic, correct?"

"Affirmative."

Using magic to guide the bullet trajectory undoubtedly would cause a side effect from phenomenon rewriting.

Likewise, using sensory enhancement magic would also reveal their location due to the psion waves.

So long as they used magic, there was no way to hide themselves from Tatsuya.

Kazama was well aware of Tatsuya's capabilities.

"Yes, during nocturnal conditions and only relying on a scope, they still successfully sniped from nearly a kilometer out."

Kazama was glancing downwards on the screen, likely looking at the map for the sniper's location. Tatsuya didn't completely understand all the nuances regarding sniping; Kazama was much more familiar with the details. Seems like Kazama had found some sort of clue that Tatsuya hadn't discovered, so even though he hadn't seen it, he could grasp the details just from Tatsuya's report.

"There are a limited number of organizations around the world that can dispatch snipers of this quality. We might actually narrow this down rather quickly."

"Then we're relying on you."

Offense was the greatest defense, referring to the concept that by rendering an opponent powerless, one would remove the threat of attack. Since they had already crossed blades once, so long as neither side presses forward, a peaceful solution was not impossible for Tatsuya.

"Hm? Give me a second. ......There's a new report coming in. We've found the car."

Even though the black car had covered its license plate, this degree of subterfuge could not fool the cameras along the streets set for defensive purposes. So long as they knew when and where the vehicle passed by, unique features could always be identified.

"Since the investigation has already begun, how about letting it start from this end?"

"As you wish."

At Kazama's question of verification, Tatsuya immediately nodded in response.

Tatsuya didn't quibble over details like whether he had to personally capture his escaped opponents.

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Owing to the unexpected live action sequence, dinner was slightly later than usual. Still, Miyuki didn't seem irritated in the slightest as she pranced around in a pink apron with frills as she prepared dinner.

"That apron......?"

"You noticed?"

Hearing the words that slipped from his mouth, Miyuki smiled and turned her head.

The apron Miyuki was wearing was simplistic but adult in its design.

While Tatsuya didn't know whether this was merely a young lady's interest, this was the first time he beheld such a fantastically adorable apron.

"This was what you just bought today?"

Before splitting at the station, Miyuki had been pulled into a store catering to young women by Mizuki and Erika.

Tatsuya lounged on the chair as he waited for them, only to have them appear much sooner than expected. When asked what they bought, Erika only said that it was a "secret", so he didn't receive a real answer.

"Mizuki said she needed a new apron so I bought one as well. This doesn't look strange on me, does it?"

Since this was considerably different than her usual fashion, Miyuki watched Tatsuya with worried eyes.

Though it was a simple matter to pass on a compliment, Tatsuya took this opportunity to seriously evaluate his sister's attire.

Given that the apron's length was the same as her skirt, it gave off the impression that she was wearing a single dress.

And a mini-skirt apron to boot.

The two straps looped over the shoulders and crossed over the back along with a wide strap tied around the waist with an adorable butterfly knot, complete with a pair of thighs charmingly exposed from the bottom.

Definitely not a getup that can be shown to anyone else, Tatsuya thought.

"It suits you perfectly. In fact, I plan on putting you in a glass display case for personal perusal."

He realized that his choice of words was slightly odd.

"Onii-sama's ideas are just a smidgen strange."

Just listening to her words might sound like she was surprised, but her expression clearly signified that she was trying to hide her embarrassment.

Still, Tatsuya didn't point this out to Miyuki and merely smiled as he picked up the chopsticks.

After dinner, the two siblings moved from the dinner table to the living room. After setting down a cup of coffee on the table before the sofa Tatsuya was occupying, Miyuki left her cup on the table and sat beside her brother.

"Speaking of which, why did that person visit us today? Did she bring a specimen for Magic Sequence storage?"

After finding a spot to sit, Miyuki sat with her legs closed and placed her hands on top of one another over them as she asked Tatsuya with eyes brimming with curiosity.

"She wanted to find out if Magic Sequence storage was possible."

Since this was an expected question, Tatsuya already prepared an answer.

"Asking for help, just like before."

Not like he was relying on half truths to muddle through this.

"Still, this job may be a little more interesting."

"Has the contract already been accepted?"

Miyuki's question was just going through the motions, she had already understood through her brother's earlier words that this task was unavoidable.

"Given that the specimen is sitting right here, seems likely."

Tatsuya's gaze shifted to one corner of the table.

The jewel box that Sayuri brought sat there innocuously.

Sayuri forced Tatsuya to hold onto the box in fear of further enemy attack.

"So this is the specimen? Does it possess the power to store Magic Sequences?"

What is it? At the wordless inquiry, Tatsuya opened the box.

"A relic of the Magatama-class."

Keeping an eye on Miyuki, Tatsuya unveiled the item's true identity.

Her hands flew to her face as Miyuki stared wide-eyed at Tatsuya.

"Why does that woman have something like this?"

"It was a request from the military. I believe they asked us to replicate this."

"That's ridiculous."

While Miyuki didn't have the same depth of understanding as Tatsuya regarding how outrageous the replication of relics was, she still understood that this was a preposterous request.

Magic Sequences influenced the Eidos of an object in order to temporarily rewrite the information surrounding the object based on the conditions described within the Magic Sequence — this was magic. For example, an orb that is outwardly red contains an Eidos that "primarily reflected red light" and is "circularly shaped". If a Magic Sequence containing the condition "primarily reflecting blue light" influenced the Eidos, then the orb would turn blue. Since the Magic Sequence overwrote the Eidos on the object, the conditions within the Magic Sequence would temporarily replace the characteristics of the object. This effect would persist until the conditions from the Magic Sequence fades away.

Though the Magic Sequence occupied a central role in the invocation of magic, using magic to preserve Magic Sequences remained impossible.

Still, if the item itself possessed the ability to replicate the effects from the altered phenomenon and the Magic Sequence could be replicated, then the effects from magic would persist ad infinitum. In other words, copying the altered phenomenon and the Magic Sequence would become possible.

Which would preserve the characteristics of the Magic Sequence as well as the characteristics of the magical effects.

Logically speaking, if Magic Sequences that changed the temperature could be preserved, then high temperatures measuring in the hundreds of degrees or cold temperatures that were dozens of degrees below zero could be achieved without any input. Likewise, replication of Speed Magic that was preserved could create actual perpetual motion machines.

"Just possessing the ability to store Magic Sequences alone is insufficient to replace Magicians, since the Magic Sequences stored within these devices can only be activated through magic. While I have little stake in replicating the Magatama itself, if this item is truly able to store Magic Sequences, then understanding that process becomes absolutely integral."

"If it's Onii-sama, then anything is possible."

At some point, Miyuki scooted over until she was directly next to Tatsuya and laid her head against Tatsuya's shoulder. She gently reassured Tatsuya, who sat there with a chilly expression on his face as he spoke.

Miyuki's policy demanded that she did everything within her power to cover all the household chores that pertained to Tatsuya without leaving them to machinery, but even she wasn't such a stickler that she washed the dishes herself.

She was still a student, with her own pile of mandatory assignments, so some level of compromise was unavoidable.

The plates and utensils from dinner were left to the HAR to dispose of as Miyuki began her homework.

Despite being known as a magic high school, all other subjects besides magic were not mandatory.

There were no regular tests, but daily homework was highly emphasized.

Today, her homework assignment was mathematics. Strictly speaking, this was not one of her strong suits.

Stuck on a question that bedeviled her from the beginning, Miyuki allowed her attention to drift from the screen before her.

This was the age where the man-machine interface could easily process these problems, so no one save for mathematical researchers would actually work out problems by themselves. Yet, mathematical logic powerfully aided the development and formation of new magic, hence her brother had stringent instructions regarding this subject, and so cutting corners was not an option.

Miyuki heaved a bored "Whew".

At times like these, she envied her omnipotent brother.

Maybe I should ask Onii-sama to teach me, she idly thought before frantically shaking her head furiously.

Right now, Tatsuya was probably deep into analyzing that relic.

Her very presence alone bound Tatsuya's freedom, so she definitely couldn't bother him anymore, Miyuki thought.

The sole reason Tatsuya entered First High was because Miyuki enrolled in First High, at least this was how Miyuki interpreted the situation.

A diploma from a magic high school was a prerequisite for attending the National Magic University, but there were always exceptions; especially, talented individuals who might have discovered a "Cardinal Code" would immediately qualify for the examination process even without a magic high school diploma. So long as Tatsuya wished to do so, he would immediately obtain that right and simply passing the examination would not trouble him in the slightest.

Miyuki knew that her brother's goal lay in the graduate level research programs within the magic universities, so the life of a high school student was actually a considerable detour for him.

The reason Tatsuya was forced to do so was because he was Miyuki's guardian.

The guardians of the Yotsuba Family bore the duty of preserving their primary's life even at the cost of their own. This title came from the combat slaves that once rescued a young woman from the Yotsuba Family from enemy attack and were responsible for preserving the Yotsuba bloodline.

On the surface, this mission differed little from ordinary bodyguards, but temporarily hired bodyguards were fundamentally different from guardians.

While the Yotsuba guardians were not selected from birth, once selected, their term was for life. Though they were the same as bodyguards in that they served for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, guardians did not possess the right to resign from their duties. Since guardians were only relieved when their primary was released from protection, to this day, without exception, Yotsuba guardians had done their duty until the day they died.

Tatsuya possessed a certain degree of freedom by virtue of the fact that he could still protect his primary even away from the house. Magic was not restricted by physical distance or obstacles. There was no telepathic connection between the two, but Tatsuya was able to unconsciously monitor Miyuki's surroundings through his "Idea Identification Vision". In other words, it may be more accurate to say that he had cast magic to keep an eye on her.

Nevertheless, even Tatsuya wasn't able to use magic while sleeping.

Even if distance was no hindrance, their everyday lives needed to synchronize to some degree.

During holidays and long vacations, Miyuki could still match Tatsuya's activities, but in school Tatsuya had to link with Miyuki, so they had to accommodate the high school schedule. Also, though magic wasn't affected by physical distance, a closer proximity made it far easier to react to possible danger.

However, in the end, all of these were only true under the condition that Miyuki does not dismiss Tatsuya from his duties as a guardian.

Once Miyuki would dismiss Tatsuya, surely another guardian, likely of the same age and gender, would be dispatched to her. Even if the number of Magicians was limited, Miyuki was still one of the more promising candidates for the next head of the Yotsuba Family.

Of course, Miyuki hoped to retain Tatsuya as her guardian for reasons that went beyond her own stubbornness.

Within the Yotsuba Family, a guardian's mission held the highest priority.

While serving as Miyuki's guardian, he wouldn't be assigned any meaningless tasks. Nor would he receive any dirty jobs.

Even their father and his new wife couldn't press the issue on the surface.

They could not insist that Tatsuya help them in their work.

Even with all these considerations in mind, she still wished for her brother to attend the same school she did — the bottom line was that she herself was unable to separate herself from that dependence on her brother, something that Miyuki was aware of.

Again, Miyuki heaved a deep sigh.

Her frazzled mind was incapable of deciphering the answer, just as she was unable to solve the homework question before her.

Actually, even if she didn't need him to guide her through every step, all she needed to do was ask her brother for help. By the time Miyuki thought of this, 30 minutes had already passed.

Chapter 3

The next day after school.

In order to acquire the documents necessary for their presentation, Tatsuya arrived at the library.

In truth, he really wanted to focus on the analysis of the specimen (Magatama-class relic), but neither could he mail it in for the Thesis Competition preparations (assistance).

Despite its name, the library had already been completely digitized, with actual tomes of paper becoming the decisive minority. Furthermore, a significant portion of the materials could be accessed online, so there was no particular need to visit the library, except that the materials required by the thesis team belonged to the restricted archives that could not be removed from it. Searching for a spare seat in the depths of the reading area, Tatsuya accidentally ran into a familiar face.

"Ara, if it isn't Tatsuya-kun."

"Saegusa-senpai, are you in the middle of the 'Fall of Studying'?"

The last time he ran into Mayumi was approximately a week ago, so he could hardly say "long time no see".

At Tatsuya's immediate reply, even though Mayumi had expected the question, she still pouted in vexation.

"I say, Tatsuya-kun...... I am a Year 3 student after all."

"This...... I know."

Tatsuya was bewildered by this perfectly obvious statement that was delivered gravely.

"The first thing that comes to mind for Year 3 students are college entrance exams, correct? How is it that you never considered I need to prepare for the exams...... Do I look that carefree to you?"

Mayumi's words only served to confuse Tatsuya even more.

"......Saegusa-senpai, didn't you receive the recommendation?"

Excellent grades, service as the Student Council President, renowned for her participation and many victories in magic competitions.

If she wasn't recommended, then who else could qualify for a recommendation.

Still, Mayumi's answer surpassed Tatsuya's expectations.

"Ah? Doesn't Tatsuya-kun know? I declined the recommendation. It is an unwritten tradition for the members of the Student Council to decline the recommendation."

"......First I've heard of this."

"Every year, each school recommends 10 students to the magic university, that's how it was decided~. Compared to other schools, our school has a higher percentage of students that take the entrance exams, so in order to more efficiently utilize the recommendation system, that's how we decided to go about it."

"In other words, we let the students on the borderline take first priority for recommendations, did I get that right?"

"That may be going a little too far...... But, that's pretty much it."

"That's......"

On some level this made perfect sense, but he still felt that there was something wrong with this system.

Despite these thoughts roaming through Tatsuya's head, he decided to drop the matter upon seeing Mayumi sitting there without any perplexity on her face.

Seeing Tatsuya hum and haw, Mayumi tilted her head to one side with a "Hm?" before her attention was caught elsewhere.

"Speaking of which, why is Tatsuya-kun here?"

Tatsuya was slightly put out by Mayumi's surprised tone — at the very least he frequented the library much more often than Mayumi did — however, there was no need to belabor that point.

"I am here to gather materials for the Thesis Competition."

"Ah, that's right, you were selected to help Rin-chan."

(......Help, eh.)

That must be the case from another person's perspective, Tatsuya thought.

Although this was also a group activity, unlike Monolith Code with the option to put an individual's talents on full display, there was no way to identify individual contribution in the thesis itself.

It was hardly odd to believe that everyone besides the primary speaker were only assistants.

"......Oh, standing there and talking would bother every one else. Come on in."

As she said this, Mayumi pointed at the reading booth she just came out of.

"Aren't you using it?"

Despite the fact that retaking the booth after returning it was against the rules, it's not like he could just stand outside the door.

Tatsuya nodded without further hesitation.

The reading booth was originally designed for one user and while two people felt a little tight, three people would be completely out of the question. Even if Mayumi belonged on the petite side of her gender, Tatsuya's physical stature was undoubtedly above average among his Year 1 peers. Despite not being particularly swarthy, his wide shoulders still took up considerable seating space. Hence Tatsuya sat near the end of the seat shoulder to shoulder with Mayumi, who took a seat on the backup stool.

He was alone in a tiny room with a beautiful young lady.

However, even under these conditions, Tatsuya was neither overly excited nor filled with trepidation. Owing to past experiences, he had already learned how to handle Mayumi. (As for her pride as a "beautiful woman", well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.)

At Tatsuya smoothly operating the terminal despite their close proximity without a care in the world, Mayumi didn't become anxious or display a disappointed expression. Frankly, she continued their interrupted conversation in a wholly unguarded fashion.

"I know it's a bit sudden for Tatsuya-kun, but good luck, OK?"

"......True, it was a little sudden."

Tatsuya was slightly off kilter at Mayumi's seemingly natural words that came without any premonition, but once he connected these words with their earlier conversation, he was fortunately able to avoid asking "For what?".

"But that's not something that Saegusa-senpai would worry about, right?"

He replied carelessly while his eyes were focused on the screen.

"That may be true. Still, this topic is more important to Rin-chan than taking First Place in the Thesis Competition."

"Now that you mention it, did senpai talk to you about serving as a substitute?"

"That's definitely not a topic I can handle. Also, I'm not that handy with sustaining magic with complex processes."

The question and answer provided didn't entirely match up, but Suzune was likely aware of what areas Mayumi excelled at, hence she removed her name from the replacements roster, Tatsuya explained to himself.

"It's unfortunate. Rin-chan helped me out quite a bit, but now I can't give her a hand."

He was unsure whether she was muttering to herself or towards him. While he thought about reassuring Mayumi, who wore a pained expression on her face, ultimately he chose to silently plug away and keep searching for data.

"So I really hope Tatsuya-kun will try his best, since Tatsuya-kun can definitely provide powerful assistance to Rin-chan."

"Does Ichihara-senpai have any particular thoughts about this topic?"

Tatsuya asked this question more out of curiosity than because he was motivated by her encouragement.

"On some level, this is the first step to realizing Rin-chan's dream."

Tatsuya didn't dig deeper into Mayumi's formless words.

Even if Suzune had a dream, surely that had nothing to do with him.

Regardless of Tatsuya's thoughts on the matter, Mayumi didn't stop there.

"Raising the social standing for Magicians. She aimed not to change their social standing through political pressure, but through economic necessity. By turning magic into an irreplaceable aspect in the economy, Magicians would be truly free of their fate as humanoid weapons. According to Rin-chan, Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor is the key step towards this goal. This thesis is precisely the first step for that purpose."

Tatsuya couldn't help but turn his head at this.

Under his widened eyes, even Mayumi shrank back a little.

"Hm, what is it?"

"That's astounding. I never thought that Ichihara-senpai was contemplating the exact same thing."

"Eh? Tatsuya-kun too?"

In all honesty, Suzune and Tatsuya couldn't be credited with the idea of using economic utility to raise Magicians' social standing. Despite the paltry number of supporters, this notion had already been around for at least twenty years. The only technicality was that there had hitherto been no sign of success.

Currently, the primary usage for Magicians remained strictly military.

With the global situation gradually stabilizing, practical mobilization of weaponry had decreased as well.

Still, innovations for Magicians — and not the magic sort — were still dominated by military purposes in the 90% tier.

At the current progression, all of this had yet to change.

The overwhelming majority of magic for domestic purposes could be replaced by machinery.

Temperature control and physical acceleration couldn't match the same superb effect from magic, but if restricted to the level for public consumption, then non-magic technology could still be viable. There was no need to use magic.

Nor did advanced automatons need to be replaced by Magicians. Magic was not required for operation or organization.

So far, no result that could only be produced by magic had supplanted the versatility of modern science, so "using economic advantages to liberate Magicians" remained empty words from idealists.

On the other hand, the concept for Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactors didn't come from Tatsuya's group either.

In this regard, research had begun 50 years ago to use magic to actualize thermonuclear fusion reactors.

Nevertheless, this research had been forgotten in this day and age.

After judging that repeatedly activating Gravity Control-type Magic to maintain a thermonuclear fusion reactor rated as one of the "Three Great Puzzles for Gravity Magic", most developed countries already used solar energy to address their energy problems, so presently there was no sign of energy shortage.

Those who placed their hopes on using Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Reactors to raise the social standing of Magicians had practically gone extinct in the latter half of the 21st century.

"I can't believe I found someone who shared such radical beliefs."

Seeing Tatsuya wear an admiring expression rather than shock, Mayumi stared at him for some unknown reason.

"......Hm, that's wonderful. So you share the same interests as Rin-chan."

Not only her eyes, even her tone was irked.

"Ah, no, I hardly think that it's a question of whether Ichihara-senpai and I share the same interests...... Our methodology is completely different."

What is she so upset about, Tatsuya thought as he replied in a fashion like someone plucking an excuse out of nowhere.

"But the basic concept is the same, right? Tatsuya-kun, in reality, Rin-chan's more your type, huh?"

"Ha?"

"Even with such an alluring young lady next to you, yet you show no signs of even trying. Well, Onee-san is sorry that she has such an adolescent figure."

What was this person talking about? Those were Tatsuya's unfiltered feelings.

Speaking of which, even if they shared the same topic, it was hardly a guarantee that they were companions and more likely that they were opponents. Despite her petite figure, Mayumi didn't boast an adolescent physique at all, more like an intriguing figure filled with mature charm.

There were too many misunderstandings that demanded his immediate attention, but Tatsuya was at a loss as to where to begin.

"I have no exhibitionist tendencies. I would never do anything to a woman before all these cameras here."

Tatsuya was quite befuddled.

The first answer that came to his mind after the cobwebs didn't appear to fit very well.

"Eh......?"

At Tatsuya's apparently profound, but actually completely careless words, Mayumi started fidgeting in place and her eyes started drifting around.

"Well, then, what if there weren't any cameras or people here? Let's say, for example, if it was just the two of us alone in a hotel room?"

"If that's senpai's invitation to dine, then I shall gladly 'dig in' without hesitation."

With a clatter, Mayumi sprang away from her stool, blushing furiously and pressed against the wall to pull as far back as possible from Tatsuya in the narrow room. Seeing this, Tatsuya suddenly realized the double entendre in his words.

Still, saying anything else would just dig himself deeper, so Tatsuya took it as a fortunate sign that he managed to stop there. He turned his gaze from Mayumi and concentrated on gathering the necessary data for the project.

On the other hand, Mayumi, who should have felt threatened by Tatsuya's response, chose to remain in the reading booth for some mysterious reason.

◊ ◊ ◊

During the evening three days before the thesis was due, Tatsuya was going over the numbers at his private work station when he noticed that the home server was under attack.

There were simultaneous attacks from multiple channels, signifying that this hacking attempt was not done by an amateur.

This was done by specialists specifically to data mine the construct.

There was a high possibility that this was not by chance, but a specific attack on this household's IP address.

No matter how many times they were beaten back, they continued pressing forward.

Quite the determined bunch indeed.

Looks like we have to switch to another IP address, Tatsuya groaned to himself as he sighed while activating the tracer.

During lunch break the next day.

Tatsuya stopped by the Counseling Room.

His target was obviously Haruka.

Of course, the subject of this conversation wasn't something trivial like teenage worries or fancies.

"......Unfortunately, the link was cut in the middle. Hence the source of the attack was not uncovered."

Haruka did nothing to hide her unwillingness to help — more like intentionally put that on full display — despite the fact that this wasn't an attitude a counselor should display. Nonetheless, after taking into account that Tatsuya's business had nothing to do with counseling and their history, this was hardly Haruka's fault.

"......And then? I'll say this ahead of time, I'm not capable of tracing them over the web."

Hearing that highly exasperated voice, Tatsuya almost burst into laughter. Still, doing so would undoubtedly rouse her ire, so he made sure to wipe that off his face.

"Naturally, I'm aware of sensei's strengths, nor do I plan to venture into such troublesome territory."

"Then what do you want?"

A wary expression spread across Haruka's face.

Whenever Tatsuya looked like he was about to cut into a serious conversation, she had to suspect that he had some ulterior motive up his sleeve. That was a lesson she had already learned by now.

"Regarding organizations that have recently been secretly trafficking in magic intel, could you elaborate on anything within your purview?"

Seeing Tatsuya adopt a "friendly" smile with a placating attitude, Haruka furrowed her brows in displeasure.

"......I say, Shiba-kun. You do know I have to maintain confidentiality, correct?"

"Naturally."

"............"

Haruka's mouth pressed into a thin line and stopped.

She probably wanted to say "Brazen little......", Tatsuya thought.

As to why, he himself thought this way.

That being said, it's not like that comment stung him.

"......From the end of last month to the first days of this one, several illegal aliens managed to infiltrate Yokohama and the surrounding environs."

In a tone that one could almost hear her sighing in, Haruka began anew.

Once enthralled by sweet temptation, escaping its grasp became difficult. For people working in the intelligence field, this was one of the rudimentary lessons.

Can't believe she fell for that...... Haruka's heart was filled with regret.

"Despite the county police and coast guard combining their efforts, they don't have much to show for it. At the same time, both 'Maximilian' and 'Rozen' suffered thefts."

Maximilian and Rozen were the top of the line in global CAD production. In other words, their goal lay in the production facilities for magic devices.

"Hard to think this is a sheer coincidence."

"Right now there is no confirmation that this was done by the same group. Shiba-kun, I advise you to avoid submitting the thesis online and bring a hard copy instead."

Only her last words were spoken with any sincerity.

Haruka diverted her gaze to her desk as Tatsuya sought to verify her intentions.

This was a sign that she didn't wish to continue the conversation.

Tatsuya knew better than to push onward.

After school at the HQ for the Public Moral Committee, Tatsuya was conveying last night's events to Isori.

"......So, there was no loss?"

"Nothing really happened."

Tatsuya raised a hand to stop Isori, who had risen in concern, as he smiled wryly and shook his head.

Isori was someone who could instantly transform into a "neutral, beautiful young lady" simply by changing a set of uniforms, so having him approach unnecessarily was still an uncomfortable experience.

Of course, since these opinions couldn't be expressed, he had to ensure that he didn't unconsciously tilt backwards.

"Compared to that, anything happen at your residence, Isori-senpai?"

Isori started before furrowing his brows and lowering his voice.

"You mean that the hacker's goal was......"

His soft voice oddly contained a hint of feminine charm.

Rumor had it that the man once despaired over the small number of male friends, but apparently that wasn't because they disliked him and was more likely they kept him at arm's length for a reason...... Contrary to the words he spoke, these thoughts were running through Tatsuya's mind.

"Given the hacker's modus operandi, their target is likely the research files associated with a magic thesis. Based on the timing, we cannot rule out that this is related to the competition itself."

Actually, based on the time frame, another reason boasted a higher probability, but that information was too sensitive for him to be that open about it.

Also, prudence harmed no one.

Tatsuya's words caused Isori's brows to bunch together, displaying an expression that he was considering whether there were any premonitions lying down that path.

"Right now, there aren't any clues on the table...... Still, I think we should inform Ichihara-senpai about what happened."

"You're right."

Tatsuya originally planned to do just that, so he immediately nodded in assent at Isori's proposal.

"Kei, sorry for the wait~."

A delighted voice that ended with a trill interrupted their conversation.

Needless to say, the one who sat beside Isori with a flourish without waiting for a response and latched onto his arm before flirting with him was Kanon.

"Tatsuya-kun, long time no see."

With a wry smile that said, what am I going to do with her, Mari also arrived and greeted Tatsuya.

While questioning whether 10 days constitutes "long time no see", after considering that they used to meet every school day up until last month, this did give off the impression that they hadn't seen each other for some time.

"Indeed. Long time no see."

Tatsuya rose and gave Mari his seat.

"Oh, thank you."

Mari didn't bother to decline and sat with a smile.

As usual, she was still a vibrant, handsome woman, Tatsuya thought as he said "You're welcome", and pulled up another chair to sit next to Mari.

"So, Tatsuya-kun, how is Kanon handling her new responsibilities?"

And Mari promptly dropped this bombshell.

Well, the former Chief inquiring on the effectiveness of the acting Chief was still within expectations, but if she and Isori were present, this conversation topic became a little awkward.

"Mari nee-san!?"

Then again, the sight of Kanon panicking swiftly illuminated the reasoning behind that question.

Quite the pleasant upperclassman-underclassman relationship, no?

"Since we don't run patrols together, I'm not familiar with the particulars, but......"

Given the hilarious potential, Tatsuya decided to put on an act.

"She is very well organized and specializes in throwing out unnecessary junk. At times, she seems overly decisive."

Tatsuya finished speaking with a perfectly serious expression and a tone with no voice inflections whatsoever, prompting both Mari and Kanon to squirm in their seats. Mari did so because she was well aware of her own deficiencies in organizational skills, while Kanon was reflecting on the numerous times she tossed something that shouldn't have been thrown away and had been forced to retrieve them.

Tatsuya's comments weren't just directed to Kanon since Mari plainly read between the lines of his words, but Isori was hopelessly lost.

Isori directed an outwardly solemn (?), but actually gentle reminder to Kanon.

"......Despite Shiba-kun's words, doesn't Kanon have a lot of things on her plate too? Relying on me is one thing, but everything else has been handed over to Shiba-kun."

"......So I'm not good at those things. I'm a firm believer in division of labor."

Her tantrum and flirtatious behavior were a world of difference from her usual — whenever Isori was not around — fiery attitude. Seeing this, both Tatsuya and Mari chuckled wryly.

"OK, we can talk about everything else some other time......"

That's about enough of that, Tatsuya thought as he turned over a new leaf as he urged Mari to "cut to the chase".

"OK, let's leave it at that. Actually, I came to discuss security for the Thesis Competition."

"Security? Is the Public Moral Committee on duty?"

"Exactly."

Having students serve as "security" for extracurricular activities was odd to say the least, but Tatsuya seemed to be the only one ill at ease. That was probably because this was the case every year.

"Even though we're called security, we don't actually provide guards for the site itself. The Magic Association will dispatch specialists for that purpose."

Rather than dodging the question, Mari provided an explanation before the question could be asked.

"The topic I want to discuss would be personal bodyguards for the team members as well as guards to watch over the report materials and supplies. After all, the Thesis Competition contains restricted information that 'may not be publicized to personnel unrelated to the magic universities'. This is public knowledge. Owing to these reasons, participants for the Thesis Competition are often the target of industrial spies."

Tatsuya was slightly surprised by this oddly appropriate topic. Even though this fell within his projected predictions, he still couldn't contain his astonishment.

"......Such as breaking into household servers?"

"......No, this is at the high school level after all...... Despite calling them spies, they are only small timers trying to make some money off this event. There's no precedent for someone hacking in to steal information......"

That makes perfect sense, Tatsuya thought as he heard Mari's answer.

In modern age, network intrusion was a serious felony. Stealing information through the network warranted heavier punishment than normal theft and belonged in the same category as homicide. At the same time, network protection had also improved substantially, making this an unprofitable venture for professional criminals.

Then the hackers from last night were indeed from....... As Tatsuya drifted into his thoughts, Mari's words picked up steam.

"Instead, we should say that security is required to prevent theft and burglary. Four years ago, there was a precedent where one of the speakers was attacked en route. Following that, each school arranged for guards to accompany key personnel in the weeks approaching the event."

Luckily, Tatsuya was able to focus in time before the conversation concluded.

"Of course, our school also follows this practice every year. The guards are selected from the Public Moral Committee and the Club Activities Group, though each principal will pick from this group."

"I will be responsible for Kei."

Of course! Kanon interrupted.

Quite the amusing reaction, Tatsuya thought, but this time he didn't break into a wry smile or break into laughter.

"......Well, looks like Isori has no complaints, so let's go with that. Of course, that includes an assistant...... Kanon, don't kick aside your teammates, OK?"

"Hey! No one is going to do something like that. I'm not that childish."

Seeing that pout and puffed up cheeks, Kanon's words "not that childish" were a little hard to take at face value, but three warm gazes chose to overlook the words "not that childish".

"Ichihara decided to take Hattori and Kirihara as her guards."

"The Club Activities Group Leader himself, eh?"

"I thought Hattori couldn't even look Ichihara in the eye?"

Mari replied to Tatsuya's blandly voiced question with a mischievous smirk.

"Next...... Is what are we going to do with you."

"There's no need."

Mari maintained her devilish smirk as she spoke, to which Tatsuya replied immediately in the negative.

"Meh, that's also true."

Likewise, Mari didn't have any intention of convincing Tatsuya otherwise.

"There's no point in surrounding you with guards, since there's a higher chance of them getting in the way. I understand, so I'll pass that along to Hattori."

At Mari's response, Tatsuya finally asked a question.

"Speaking of which, why is Watanabe-senpai here?"

There was no particular reason behind this question. Tatsuya was curious as to why the current Chief Kanon wasn't coordinating this, but the previous Chief Mari was coordinating between the Public Moral Committee and Club Activities Group.

"......Uh, there's no real reason......"

At Mari's vague mumbling, Tatsuya face colored in ire.

He clearly received the signal at how much they were overly protected as Mari twisted to one side in embarrassment.

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The products in First High's student store had far surpassed the level of "high school student stores".

Still, each of the nine magic high schools was like this, so as to provide materials related to magic studies not sold in normal stores to reduce student stress and raise necessary supplies to meet the rising demand.

In the end, this was still a small student store on campus, so if there was an item that simply couldn't be obtained on campus, then students still had to go off campus to obtain them.

In this area, all nine magic high schools were also the same, as stores had sprouted along the nearby streets leading to the high schools to provide materials, notebooks, books, and miscellaneous items that could not be purchased in the student store.

As mentioned above, the stores lined along the streets near First High had a plethora of selections available.

Tatsuya and Isori were purchasing slides for the 3-D projector in one of the shops in front of the station. The deadline for the project was tomorrow, so they couldn't afford to wait for the student store to get new merchandise.

"Plainly, we would be fine without the senpais accompanying us......"

The reason that Tatsuya still said this halfway through the trip was partially because he was apologetic that the upperclassmen had to tag along the entire time, and partially to suppress Kanon, who latched onto her lover heedless of other people watching them.

Clearly, the grass was greener on the other side, while the reverse was also true. Possibly, the bystanders had a more objective view of the situation.

Since Kanon was the only one flirting whereas Isori seemed entirely at a loss what to do, the pair was not completely hopeless yet.

Speaking of which, Miyuki was still on campus. Kanon had a legitimate reason in serving as Isori's protection, but even if this was a temporary jaunt, Miyuki didn't have the luxury of abandoning her responsibilities in the Student Council and following her brother. Currently, precisely because she was well aware that Kanon was with them, she was hammering away at the terminal with great irritation.

"No, leaving everything to Shiba-kun would be bad form. Also, I want to verify the products as well."

Basically, the overly diligent Isori's reply was only to be expected.

At this point, Tatsuya didn't think he could just send the two of them packing either. His earlier comment was both a mild complaint and also an attempt to clear out the slightly feminine laughter that needled the ears. He could relax after making the conscious decision to block all this out, which was one area that Tatsuya excelled in.

Afterwards, using an incredibly slow pace that wasted another 5 minutes, they finally arrived at the shop.

Tatsuya swiftly made all the necessary purchases and let Isori know that "I'm waiting outside", before stepping out of the store.

Finally able to catch some peace and quiet, Tatsuya noticed that someone was spying on him.

There was no sign that someone was shadowing him. Even if he had been harassed by sweet whispers expected (?) from a high school couple, he didn't lower his guard.

However, even if they weren't Tatsuya, anyone would notice such an obvious gaze.

This store was along the shortest route from the school to the station and was almost on the station's doorstep. If someone was waiting in ambush at the front of the station, it would be a simple task to identify students on their way home, so he estimated that they must have been camping here since much earlier. Although their figure remained hidden, their rampant hostility signified that they were up to some deviltry. On the other hand, in terms of sheer wariness, this level was altogether childish compared to the sniping attack Tatsuya weathered two days ago.

As he debated over what action to take, Isori and Kanon came out with their purchases.

"Sorry for the wait...... What happened?"

Tatsuya could only sigh in appreciation at Isori's ability to sense something was off the moment he stepped out of the store and ask him the cause of it.

He wasn't wearing such an opaque expression.

As evidenced by Kanon tilting her head to one side with a "Huh?" expression on her face.

Isori was an expert on magic utilizing delayed activation conditions, but these observation skills probably coincided more with sensory systematic magic.

"Nothing, we're being observed, so I was thinking of how to respond."

There was no need to hide this detail, so Tatsuya directly answered Isori's question.

Still, he wasn't able to finish that answer.

"Observed? By spies!?"

Tatsuya remained thinking, because Kanon interjected before he could say "how to respond".

And very loudly too.

That was like telling their opponent to "bail now" and, as expected, the observation was cut short as whoever was responsible quickly departed.

Yet, Kanon was worthy of being Mari's chosen successor.

After a simple "where?" to Tatsuya, she immediately sped off in the direction Tatsuya's eyes pointed towards.

"Kanon, magic!"

"I know! Have faith in me, Kei."

He reminded her precisely because he didn't completely believe her, but Isori was half a beat slower than Kanon, so he could only stand there with her emergency replacement, Tatsuya, and helplessly watch her rapidly departing figure.

As well as being in the top tier of Magicians around the world, Kanon was also a member of the cross country club.

She didn't have the same leg strength as a top flight athlete who didn't know magic, but she was a match for any ordinary high school student, even the boys as well.

With her skirt flying, Kanon immediately noticed the petite figure fleeing the area from the corner of her eye.

That young girl was wearing the same school uniform she was wearing.

She was surprised by this turnout, but acting was always her stronger suit and Kanon's philosophy was always decisive action without waffling over the details. Although she didn't hear any convincing evidence on Tatsuya's part that this was her culprit, Kanon never let up on her pursuit.

The distance was rapidly shrinking. By the time there were 10 meters between them, the fleeing young girl turned to look.

Revealing a face not covered by a mask nor wearing dark shades to disguise her features.

The young girl didn't intend to catch Kanon's eyes, but that was the result forged through chance.

By the time Kanon noticed that the young girl had drawn a small device, the young girl turned towards a new direction and held the device between the two of them.

Not good, Kanon thought.

On reflex, she halted her footsteps and shut her eyes.

Despite raising her hands to protect her face, she knew that this was a futile gesture.

Through the cracks in her arms, a burning, violent flash could be seen through the eyelids.

Several curious bystanders who were watching the two of them screamed in pain.

Kanon closed her left eye that couldn't be fully protected from the flash and opened her right eye that managed to avoid any damage.

The young girl was fleeing on a scooter.

Kanon extended her right arm to the left wrist.

The bracelet around her wrist began to absorb psions and began spreading the Activation Sequence according to the instructions she was inputting into the CAD.

However, before Kanon could complete the Activation Sequence, psion pellets that materialized suddenly behind her shattered it.

"What are you doing!?"

"Kanon, don't!"

Both occurred at the exact same time.

As Kanon whirled around and Isori rushed forward, their words overlapped with one another.

Behind Isori, Tatsuya stood there with a handgun-shaped CAD raised.

Isori arrived where Kanon, who stood there stiffly in shock at her lover's shout, was standing.

While running towards her, Isori had already finished constructing the Magic Sequence.

Towards the fleeing scooter that continued forward, he invoked the Release Systematic Magic "Road Extension".

The wheels on the scooter, which had just started to egress from the scene, suddenly started skidding.

No matter how hard the engine pushed, there was no way to advance.

Despite the open path before her, she was unable to escape this linear maze.

The secret lay in Coulomb's Law. By altering the electrons between the tires and road, he had reduced the friction to nearly zero. The mere description of the magic was simple enough, but the calculations necessary to actually realize this Magic Sequence were absolutely terrifying.

At the same time, he used magic to increase the gyroscopic effect to prevent the vehicle from falling over and any early acceleration had been devoured by Coulomb's Law, so the scooter the young girl was riding was effectively stranded.

There was no way for her to escape.

Isori, Kanon, and Tatsuya all thought this was a foregone conclusion, which was a perfectly natural and expected judgment. From a common sense perspective, there was no way to escape this trap.

But they didn't know one thing.

This young lady was a complete amateur when it came down to reckless behavior.

Once an amateur was forced into desperate straits, they often decide upon a ridiculous course of action.

If an act of desperation was all she had left, then surely the ending was already written, except desperate measures had a habit of succeeding in desperate times.

The young girl thumbed the button on the end of the left side of the handle that was covered by a plastic lid.

Normal scooters don't have a button there.

The button was covered by a lid like the ones seen on a fire alarm that could only be used once. This button married the "one use only" function to the "abandon after use" function.

Abruptly, the back of the seat exploded.

The back of the seat went flying, revealing two twin-linked rockets that began spewing flame.

The scooter sprang forward with a kick.

The young girl riding the scooter frantically clung to the handle when her body started tilting backwards.

Speechless, Tatsuya could only watch the rapidly diminishing figure.

She never let go of the handle possibly because some sort of function was built into the glove. So she had planned ahead to this point, Tatsuya thought.

Still, your average person wouldn't choose to attach rockets propelled by rocket fuel beneath their seat.

The fuel amount could be estimated based on the amount of time the rocket was lit, so if the scooter tipped over and ignited, the ensuing explosion would undoubtedly kill any innocent bystanders nearby.

It was a veritable miracle that the scooter didn't fall over and kept moving forward after the rockets were ignited.

Usually, sudden acceleration would lead to an abrupt loss of control and the subsequent crash.

If not for the magics that increased gyroscopic force and also reduced tire friction to practically zero, that was the most likely result.

If they had used Kanon's magic instead of Isori's magic to stop her, the scooter would definitely have fallen over and caused a tragedy.

"......What was that child thinking......"

"......I think we should say that we're both pretty lucky......"

It appeared that both his senpais were thinking along the same lines Tatsuya was.

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After abandoning the modified scooter, the young girl sucked in great gasps of air as she squirmed into the van prepared by her collaborator ahead of time.

She never imagined that having flames sprout out from a close proximity would be such a terrifying event.

While driving the scooter, she had the impression that her skirt, the back of her shirt and her hair were burning the entire time.

The driver of the van remained silent.

There were no words of comfort for her.

Which was only to be expected.

They weren't companions. They were merely collaborators.

The young girl tightly hugged her arms.

On top of the seat painted a dull gray by the tinted windows, the young girl sat there motionlessly.

Shortly afterward, her terror gradually faded until only regret gnawed at her heart.

She had been overcome by her flight instinct, but coldly examining the facts told her that this was not necessary.

After all, the only thing she had done was watching that man.

Her guilty conscience stole her ability to think objectively. As she became aware of this, the young girl was consumed with an irresistible fury at her own failings.

She also became aware that she was not suited for this line of work.

She was publicly acknowledged to be the indoor type and she didn't feel any need to change any of that.

Her dear older sister was also like that.

Her scholarly older sister was her role model, but since she wasn't as talented as her sister, she chose a path that suited her interest in working with machinery.

So what was she doing with these suspicious individuals, she asked herself.

She immediately reached an answer.

From the depths of her heart.

It was all because she could never forgive that man.

She cared not for the rewards of her labor.

So long as she could see a regretful expression pass over that man's face, that alone would be sufficient.

The young girl suddenly broke into laughter.

That was because she remembered that she had seized the initiative today.

Even though she didn't have the luxury to watch the rear view mirror, he must have sat there stunned as he could only watch her successfully get away......

The young girl's laughter was as dark as it was masochistic, with a trace of obsession tucked within.

With each breath of laughter, the young girl's heart fractured a little more.

Not like there was anyone on board who was going to stop her.

Inside one of the old buildings sitting in the outskirts of Tokyo, several older display screens were set up in a room within an office that appeared to be an office of commerce on the outside. Several men garbed in different attires stood before these screens and were intently watching the display.

One middle-aged man with a dark cloud over his face gestured at the young girl laughing madly on the screen that linked to the interior of the van and spoke up.

"Is that girl going to be OK?"

The man cared little for her well-being. He was only wondering if the young girl's idiocy would be traced back to them.

"Mr. Zhou arranged for the driver, so we would be above suspicion even if something did occur."

"Why exactly are we trusting this young middle man again?"

The young man's face floated across his mind as another man spoke up in displeasure.

—Not only was he an irritating factor, he was also completely untrustworthy.

That was this man's undisguised feelings.

"What of the relic?"

To sweep aside the jittery atmosphere, the man changed the topic. One of his subordinates before the monitor displays immediately replied back.

"We have discovered no signs that it has left the FLT office. Current location is unknown."

"Hm...... Four Leaves, eh? What an irksome name, is it connected to the Yotsuba Family in any way?"

"Yes, but after extensive investigation, no link was discovered. Also, this country likes to use Yotsuba or Yatsuha in their company names."

"That makes this a little difficult."

The man's words were infused with disgust, hatred and irritation, but at the same time, the voice could not hide his fear.

The Yatsuha name was associated with the Four Great Systems and Eight Major Types in modern magic as well as the Garbhako'sa-Dhatu Mandala, so modern corporations delighted in using that name. Still, there was another meaning behind the Yotsuba name. Using the name of the

Yotsuba Family from the Ten Master Clans was considered a taboo by individuals affiliated with magic. If Japanese corporations used the Yotsuba name, both intelligence and criminal organizations feared to rouse the Yotsuba Family's wrath by harming their assets. Since the Yotsuba Family hadn't declared otherwise, there were many corporations who "pretended" to be affiliated with the Yotsuba Family.

Even though this was but a cheap parlor trick, that did not mean there were no effects. Currently, their side had already expended considerable time and energy to guard against the Yotsuba Family's detection, a fact that brought a bitter expression to the man's face when he remembered this.

"Don't relax the surveillance on Sayuri. Do we have any intel on the family she visited two nights ago?"

At the man's question, another subordinate spoke up.

"Her husband's son and daughter from his first marriage reside there."

"Was it just to placate her stepchildren?"

After adopting a "How boring" expression at his subordinate's response, the man resumed asking in a businesslike manner.

"What's their background?"

"Both of them are Year 1 students at the Magic University-affiliated First High."

However, that answer roused the man's interest.

"Names?"

"The older brother is called Shiba Tatsuya, the sister is called Shiba Miyuki."

"Shiba Tatsuya?"

Just as the man was searching his memory for this familiar name, the subordinate monitoring the van spoke up.

"He is the target of our collaborator's vendetta."

"I see, magic university affiliated high school? ......What a coincidence."

After considering this for a few seconds, the man couldn't help but break into a smirk as he gave new orders.

"Add the Magic University-affiliated First High to the list of observation targets. If necessary, pull men from other projects. Also, provide additional reinforcements for that girl and tell her the easiest path to vengeance lays through leaking critical information. And give that child a weapon as well."

The orders were fired off one at a time.

"Captain Lu!"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are in command. Any meddlesome interlopers are to immediately be disposed of!"

After giving his last orders to a bulky youth, the man departed from the room.

Chapter 4

Today was the deadline to turn in the thesis, presentation draft, and materials to the school.

Suzune, Isori, and Tatsuya had no interest in trying to slapdash the job the day before the deadline, so they had produced the data disc the day before.

During the lunch break, they gathered to go over the final checklist that was not directed towards the contents within, but examining the context and manner of presentation of the major points. After passing their inspection, they accepted Haruka's suggestion and Suzune personally handed the data disc to Tsudzura.

"Does Ono-sensei's advice to not turn in the thesis online have anything to do with yesterday's incident?"

After finishing the portion he was responsible for, Isori asked in a blank manner.

"Possibly."

After finishing his task (even the burden allotted to a Year 1 student was by no means light), Tatsuya replied in a whisper to avoid distracting Suzune.

"It would be far simpler to hack from on campus to get a glimpse of the network."

"Even then that's quite challenging."

Isori shrugged at Tatsuya's point.

At the same time, accompanied by the typing sounds on a traditional keyboard — the sound from Suzune's favored traditional keyboard — Suzune turned back this way.

"Was it really a student from our school?"

After finishing her inspection, Suzune organized the materials and joined the conversation.

"No, that remains a 'maybe'."

"Even the uniform wouldn't be that difficult to obtain if they tried."

Hearing Tatsuya and Isori's replies, Suzune fell into thought.

"Isori-kun and Chiyoda-san should have access to the student roster."

Isori was a member of the Student Council and Kanon was the Chief of the Public Moral Committee, so they had the power to review the student roster. Of course, the amount of private information available was zero, so they could only make a cursory inspection of mug shots and full photos.

"Kanon was the only one who got a partial glimpse from the side of the face, so we have to be careful we don't exclude the suspect. Also, with nearly 300 female students on campus, there's no way to identify our target if we can't narrow it down to a manageable number."

Isori wasn't referring to this as a hypothetical situation.

In reality, these were Kanon's words after attempting that this morning.

"Yesterday, the only thing we could say is that one side was chasing the other. Even if we know who the culprit was, the only thing we could do is put her under surveillance, which is the same thing as doing nothing."

Suzune and Isori were aware of what Tatsuya was saying.

Monitoring students that haven't broken any rules — technically, using a flashbang while escaping could constitute a problem — may lead to accusations of stalking.

At this stage, there was nothing they could do except be on their guard.

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By the time Tatsuya returned to class, Erika already took over his seat.

"Ah, you're really early today."

She quickly discovered Tatsuya's presence and rose from the chair.

She wasn't impudent enough to keep sitting there. After Tatsuya sat down, she sat on the edge of the desk itself, which was exercising considerable restraint on her part.

"What were you guys talking about?"

Still, just as Erika observed, he was quite early today.

He didn't immediately face towards the terminal, but struck up a conversation with Mizuki, who sat next to him.

The conversation target was Mizuki because she wore an uneasy expression on her face.

"She said she felt someone watching her."

However, the one who answered was Erika.

"Watching her?"

At his renewed question, Mizuki hesitantly nodded.

"Early in the day, I felt an annoying gaze on me. A nauseating gaze that's lurking in the darkness somewhere."

"A stalker perhaps?"

"That is impossible. I'm not a worthwhile target to be pursued."

The likeliest possibility was presented first, but Mizuki shot that one down by repeatedly shaking her head as if to dispel a ridiculous notion.

"I'm not the target. I think I'm just part of a much larger web being cast out."

Her vague words were likely because she wasn't able to express herself very well.

On the other hand, Tatsuya knew perfectly what she was trying to convey.

"In other words, the target isn't a single student, but many students and professors or even the school at large. Is that what you mean?"

"Ah, uh...... That may be my mistake too."

The uncertain attitude was also one facet of her personality. Since they had no evidence, there was nothing for it.

"No, I think Shibata-san is onto something."

Yet, as if to shore up Mizuki's flagging confidence, Mikihiko arrived and spoke in the affirmative.

"Since yesterday morning, the spirits on campus have been thrown into an unnatural uproar. I think someone must have thrown down a Shiki."

Since Erika occupied Tatsuya's seat, Leo didn't keep turning around like he usually did. However, he whirled around after hearing Mikihiko's words.

"Shiki, as in a shikigami from SB Magic?"

Mikihiko nodded at Leo's inquiry.

"It's a little difficult to tell since they used a different type than we do, but there's definitely a Magician of unknown origin snooping around here."

"It's not that rare of an occurrence, is it?"

Erika's skepticism also held merit.

Even though this was a high school, they were still affiliated with the magic universities and had access to many important documents. With so many talented Magicians in its faculty, First High was often the target of individuals who homed in on magic abilities.

"Generally speaking, if they are blocked by the defensive magics hung on the walls, they usually don't come back the same day. But this opponent continues his assault no matter how many times they've been beaten back. The fact that they're searching for something isn't surprising, but this is the first time I've seen such sheer obstinacy since coming to school here."

Mikihiko responded to Erika's rather tactful objection with a confident rejoinder of his own.

"......Mikihiko, just then, you said they used a different sort of magic than we did, correct?"

"Indeed I did."

Mikihiko was quite concerned by Tatsuya's choice of words and nervously confirmed Tatsuya's question.

"Are you saying a shikigami from a different branch of the Shinto System? Or are you saying that it's fundamentally different from this country's Ancient Magic?"

He had no idea that the contents of such a carelessly phrased sentence could be mined from another direction; Mikihiko's expression grew solemn.

"I think that's not a magic spell from our country."

"Hey, are you talking about foreign spies?"

"Isn't that the exact point he's making?"

Leo's wide-eyed stare completely contrasted against Erika's light words, but in reality both of them were on the same wavelength.

"Such conspicuous behavior."

"They're doing whatever they please. What the heck are the police doing?"

Thanks to Tatsuya's words, Erika directed her ire towards the law enforcement.

Rather than being outraged at public officials slacking on the job, she appeared to be scolding her family members instead, which prompted an "Ah?" thought from both Tatsuya and Mikihiko.

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Meanwhile, Inspector Chiba of the Kanagawa Prefecture Police — more like exiled from the main office to the Kanagawa Prefecture Police Department — sneezed as if on cue.

"......What's wrong, Inspector? You suddenly look agitated."

Sergeant Inagaki, who was currently investigating the illegal entry incident at the Yokohama Harbor, directed a look at his immediate superior's suspicious action.

"Ah, for some reason I feel cold all of a sudden."

"Are you OK? We're busy enough as it is, don't even try to pretend to be ill."

"What do you mean pretend to be ill, you......"

Inspector Chiba's voice had a tinge of a reprimand mixed in, which Inagaki promptly ignored.

"Inagaki-kun, you should at least respect the chain of command."

At Chiba's words, Inagaki gave him a skeptical look.

"You're in no position to say that" was written all over his face, but the words that came out of his mouth were entirely different.

"Compared to that, do we need to continue taking testimonials? I doubt we'll find any more witnesses even if we go further."

Inagaki had a point there. After many days of recording testimonies, they received no new information on those who penetrated the border.

Chiba wore a self-depreciating grin as he looked at Inagaki, whom he saw more as a partner than a subordinate.

"Of course there are witnesses, it's just that they choose to remain silent."

"Inspector, you mean......"

Inagaki seemed to pick out something from his superior's delicate tone as his eyes sharpened.

"Hey, don't scare anybody."

"I think the Inspector is the terrifying one. Did you notice something?"

"Relax, I didn't do anything off the book. Well, they say snakes go through snake paths, so let's take a look at the snake's den."

Hearing Chiba's proposal, Inagaki wore an unwilling expression.

"Backdoor dealings are still against the law......"

"I think this still falls within acceptable parameters, right? Not like this is the time to worry over small details like that."

"Uh...... Is that so?"

As Inagaki was nodding and looking for a counter argument, Chiba had already taken a seat in the driver's seat of the plainclothes police car parked in the free parking area. After verifying that his partner had climbed on board, Chiba took the car towards the high class residential sector dominated by foreigners.

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The destination for the plainclothes patrol car carrying Inspector Chiba and Sergeant Inagaki was the parking lot for a cafe located in the Yokohama Hills area. After Chiba turned off the engine, Inagaki turned a sour face on him.

"Inspector, I have nothing against taking a break here and there, but weren't we headed for the 'snake's den'?"

At his subordinate who was leveling a hard look at him that blatantly accused him of being lazy, Inspector Chiba responded with a regretful expression.

"This is the 'snake's den'."

"Ah?"

After hurriedly catching up to his superior who had already disembarked and was locking the door with a remote, Inagaki looked over the cafe once more as he stood next to Chiba.

At first glance, this was a quiet, peaceful cafe. The quaint windows modeled after a cabin in the mountains had a pair of shutters that were currently open and not trying to hide anything at all.

"Ah, calling him a snake would be disrespectful to the owner. The owner's intelligence network is quite sophisticated and he doesn't have a criminal record either."

"Are you saying he's a big fish that we haven't pinned anything on yet?"

"I think he would prefer the term professional businessman over a big fish."

Inspector Chiba lightly shrugged and opened the "Rotterbart" doors.

Thanks to its proximity to tourist locations, there were quite a few customers present, even though it was already past the time for usual luncheon.

Still, the place wasn't very rowdy.

The mood within the cafe seemed to reflect the owner's personality as each of the customers sat there quietly enjoying their drinks. All present belonged to a slightly older generation. Any assumption that they were all tourists would be incorrect, as the majority of them appeared to be regular patrons who favored this establishment in particular.

Chiba sat in the second chair in one corner of the counter (Inagaki occupied the first) and ordered two cups of coffee from the owner.

The owner appeared to be a businessman on the outside, but Chiba knew very well that he hadn't abandoned his other trade either. Still, the conversation was stillborn before the coffee arrived and just sitting there seemed to be a waste of time, so he took this opportunity to glance around the place.

Off to the side of the counter, a coffee mug that had just been used sat there likely because the customer had just left in a hurry so the owner didn't have time to recover the mug. What a shame that such a wonderful coffee was just wasted like that. As he ruminated over this idea in boredom, Chiba suddenly discovered that while he was fixated on the coffee mug, the customer he thought had departed in a hurry had returned.

The one who sat down next to the counter was a young woman roughly Chiba's age.

He kept his face forward while surreptitiously glancing at the woman's features.

At first glance, she didn't possess incredible beauty. She wore a plain tunic and skirt, but upon closer inspection, she possessed delicate facial features and an outstanding figure.

This gave Chiba the feeling that she intentionally applied a small amount of makeup.

After drinking in these details, he wordlessly shifted his gaze forward.

He should be calling himself out on his idiocy.

His excuse for not asking a few questions in a professional capacity was because of her inconspicuous appearance, but his actions just now were practically outright flirting.

Inagaki's suspicious gaze was starting to hurt.

The owner behaved as his cool appearance suggested and continued to silently prepare the coffee.

Chiba could only sit there and wait for the coffee to be served.

At this time, an unexpected laughter broke the silence.

He could only use his eyes to verify this, but just as he expected, her shoulders were shaking as she bowed her head forward.

"......I apologize. I was still thinking of how to handle a conversation, then you just went ahead and sat there. So it's true that you're not adept at handling women, O heir of the Chiba Family?"

Inspector Chiba was astounded, and not because she was dead on regarding his personality.

Nor was it a major secret that he was the heir of the Chiba Family.

Still, he never tried to proactively publicize his identity or picture through public relations.

In terms of publicized information, his brother Naotsugu far surpassed him.

Besides criminals or those affiliated with the police, anyone able to tell that he was Chiba Toshikazu on sight would have to hail from a select group of the world's population.

Namely, people who wielded magic in live combat.

"You are......"

"Pleased to meet you, Inspector Chiba. You may call me Fujibayashi Kyouko."

This time Chiba was truly struck speechless.

The daughter of the Fujibayashi Family renowned for their prowess in Ancient Magic and granddaughter of Kudou Retsu, one of the elders in the Japanese magic community, stood before him smiling without reserve.

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It had been a long time since Tatsuya's party of eight had passed through the school gates together.

"Tatsuya-kun, have you finished all the preparations for the Thesis Competition?"

Even though the eight of them hadn't congregated recently, the one who first asked this question for some unknown reason was Honoka, who attended the Student Council with Miyuki and departed with Tatsuya on a daily basis.

"I can only say we've finished this stage. Right now, we still have to worry about the minute details like preparing the models for the presentation and assorted adjustments."

"Sounds tough. Speaking of which, Mizuki's helping out with the model production, right?"

Erika didn't belong to either the Student Council or the Club Activities Group, yet was still curiously well informed as she shook her ponytail back and forth as she looked towards Mizuki.

"Ah, yes. I'm helping out a Year 2 senpai. Even though I'm not really doing anything."

"We left the model entirely to Isori-senpai, so it makes sense that Year 2 students make up the bulk of the production personnel."

"Hm~, so what does Tatsuya do?"

Leo took this opportunity to ask Tatsuya, who had voiced his support for Mizuki.

"I perform calibration for the magic techniques used during the presentation."

"......Isn't it usually the other way around?"

"Really? In terms of producing objects, I think Isori-senpai's several leagues ahead of me."

"Well, Kei-senpai does fit the 'alchemist' impression more than a 'magister'. I guess this is the right tool for the job."

Seeing Tatsuya tilt his head, Erika wryly smiled and expressed her agreement.

"Alchemist? RPG?"

Shizuku continued to keep her head tilted to one side.

"Using that as an analogy, what class would Tatsuya be?"

Suddenly, Mizuki sprouted this question.

"He would be a mad scientist of course." [Erika] "That's not from an RPG." [Shizuku] "Then, maybe a sage dwelling in the remote lands far removed from civilization that imparts a secret technique." [Erika] "A martial sage then." [Leo] "An evil wizard scheming to conquer the world?" [Erika] "I think a Demon King would be more suitable." [Mikihiko] "No, no, no, after defeating the Demon King, turns out I'm the real man behind the man~. Doesn't he fit being the Final Boss who bars the main character's way?" [Leo] "How come everyone doesn't think he fits the hero?" [Honoka] "Forget it, Honoka. I do give off an evil vibe after all." [Tatsuya] "Onii-sama, strength alone is the true justice." [Miyuki] "Oh snap, as expected of the Demon King's sister!" [Erika]

......And thus, a vibrant discussion began.

Even though they were walking along and bickering as students do, Tatsuya never let down his guard.

After reaching the intersection that leads to a few small stores, Tatsuya turned to face the direction where he felt someone watching him.

"Want to head over there?"

In response to Tatsuya's suggestion to take a detour and incur more time spent to handle the pursuit,

"Agreed!"

"Tatsuya will probably be very busy starting tomorrow."

"Indeed. Let's grab a cup of tea."

Erika, Leo, and Mikihiko's responses seemed a little too eager. They likely each had their own agenda in mind.

Tatsuya feigned ignorance and pushed open the door that led to the "Eine Brise" Cafe.

Unfortunately, their usual two tables that seated four people each weren't available to be joined together, so the eight of them crowded around the counter and the table that stood closest.

The ones next to the counter were Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka, and Mizuki (In order of seating, there was Mizuki, Miyuki, Tatsuya, and Honoka).

At the table, Erika sat with Shizuku while Leo and Mikihiko shared the other side.

From an outsider's perspective, Tatsuya would undoubtedly be the scoundrel with a harem of several beauties serving him.

"Ah~, welcome, welcome. Seems you're just as popular as usual, Tatsuya-kun."

Eh, forget outsiders, even the owner of the establishment who was familiar with their group cast a cold gaze from the other side of the counter.

"I'm sure the owner would be just as popular if you would just shave off that beard."

Tatsuya intentionally retaliated with the taboo (?) word 'popular'.

"That's true, Owner. That beard is a darn waste and makes you look rather old."

Thanks to Mizuki's innocent (?) nature, she naturally provided supporting fire.

"Old, eh...... Mizuki-chan certainly doesn't hold anything back."

His beard definitely qualified as a mess. The owner sighed deeply while gently brushing his beard in order.

Despite the gray coloring, the owner wasn't nearly as ancient as Mizuki made him out to be.

More like he was quite young actually. Certainly he wasn't yet 30 years of age.

His hair color and beard were both gray, likely due to genetics. After all, the owner was a quarter German ("Eine Brise" meant "slight wind" in German, which warmed Leo's heart enough to make him a frequent patron).

Still, the only feature that marked his foreign lineage was his hair color, as his pupils were black and his face was thin and angular in the Asian fashion. Even though he had the gentle aura of a handsome male, the owner seemed to be very particular about his appearance and took great pains to cultivate his beard and hair to create a more masculine image.

Nevertheless, Tatsuya and company felt that the beard didn't suit him very well, but the scent of coffee more than compensated for that. Of course, all eight of them ordered coffee.

"Eh...... So you're appearing in the Thesis Competition."

While the water was on the broil, the owner inquired the reason why they hadn't frequented here recently and responded with an appropriately exaggerated nod.

"You're quite capable despite your Year 1 student status."

The owner's feelings weren't just idle talk to pass the time. Speaking of which, even though the owner didn't have any magic talent of his own, the very fact that he opened a store on the road to the magic high school implied that he knew a few details regarding the world of Magicians. Occasionally during their idle conversations, he could surprise Tatsuya and the others with news or trivia that they didn't know about before.

"It's Yokohama's turn to host the event this year, right? My old house is in Yokohama. The setting will be in the International Conference Center like usual, eh? That's quite close to my house."

The owner continued to speak as he used this opportunity to pour the coffee from the kettle into the mugs.

"Where's your old house in Yokohama?"

Mizuki asked this question as she took the coffee for four people from the owner on a tray in place of a waitress.

"There's a cafe called 'Rotbart' halfway up the Yokohama Hills."

"So your old house is also a cafe."

"Indeed. If you get a chance, make sure you stop by. I would love to hear an unreserved opinion on who serves a better cup of coffee between my father and I."

"Owner, you're a heck of a salesman."

Shizuku returned the tray in place of Mizuki and offered a direct retort that caused both sides of the counter to burst into laughter.

By the time Tatsuya's mug was down to its last third, Erika had already drained her cup in one gulp and silently placed the mug back (a sign of excellent upbringing on her part) and rose to her feet.

"Erika-chan?"

"I need to use the restroom."

After replying to Mizuki, who had raised her head in question, she lightly walked towards the back of the store.

"Oh!"

Afterwards, Leo immediately pressed a hand to his pocket and stood up.

"Sorry, phone call."

Leo stepped outside after dropping that line.

"Mikihiko, what are you doing?"

Tatsuya's gaze returned from Leo's oddly polite behavior to rest on the notebook (more like a small journal) that lay open next to Mikihiko's hand.

"Uh, well, there's a few things I have to write down so I don't forget them."

As Mikihiko replied back, the hand holding a pen never stopped moving.

"You'll be discovered if your movement is too obvious, so make sure to dial it down."

After Tatsuya said this and swept a razor sharp glance behind Mikihiko's back — and not his surroundings — he kept his back to the counter and continued sipping his coffee like nothing happened.

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"Old man, want to have some fun?"

Even though this was an alley with sparse traffic, the man almost dropped the drink in his hand upon hearing these words before the sun had even set.

Turning around, he found a young girl with a ponytail that could be described as "beautiful" in a heartbeat standing at the intersection where he was keeping an eye on the cafe's backdoor. She kept both hands held behind her back as she smiled happily.

However, upon recognizing her face, the man became anxious for a wholly different reason.

"What are you talking about? You should be more careful with yourself."

"Ah? I just said 'have some fun'. What exactly did you take that for?"

The young girl continued to wear an innocent smile as she tilted her head to one side. There was no doubt about it, she was one of the people close to his surveillance target.

"Don't mock adults. Now stop messing around and go home."

He was mentally sweating buckets, so all he could do was put on his game face and continue to act like "an adult annoyed by a child's antics and about to leave".

"The sun is about to set. If you stay in a place with little traffic like this, you risk running into the phantom killer."

As he said this, the man turned his back on the young girl.

Only to stop dead in his tracks.

"......By phantom killer, you mean someone like me?"

Directly in front of him, a bulky youth chuckled while smacking his fist that was covered with a black glove into his other hand that also wore a black glove.

"Didn't you know? Phantom killers refer to 'Magicians who just happen to be "passing through" '."

Within the young girl's happy reply to the young man, the man began to feel increasingly uneasy and turned around again.

The young girl wielded a retractable police baton and fell into a combat stance.

She smoothly raised the police baton in her hand, but that simplistic motion caused an overpowering pressure to resonate from the young woman in an instant.

If he had lowered his guard, that "pressure" would have sent the man to his knees...... From this, he knew what that was.

That was her fighting spirit.

Not killing intent, the wish to crush the life from one's opponent, but a pure desire to seek combat.

"Scary...... So you're the type of woman who only reveals her true nature in these kinds of places."

He heard a voice merrily commenting on the situation.

Despite his inability to verify the conditions behind him, he believed that the young man must have made this remark with a grin on his face.

"Help! Thieves!"

There was no way for him to escape. If that was the case, the man decided he might as well call for help.

He possessed a modicum of ability.

Even if he wasn't the most talented individual, he didn't believe that he could be vanquished by fifteen or sixteen year olds.

Regardless, he was currently in the middle of an assignment, so he chose to avoid confrontations if possible, given that squaring off against them served no benefit towards his mission parameters.

"Wow~, how weak......"

"No, no, I think you should praise his decisive judgment, right?"

The action the man chose seemed to gravely disappoint the young girl.

But the young girl didn't let go of the police baton, nor did the young man drop his raised fists.

—Afterward, nobody came to answer the man's calls for help.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that it's useless for you to call for help, OK? After all, no one drops by this area."

"More like no one can even approach. We've already set up a barrier around here with our 'understanding' as the foundation, so you're not leaving here without knocking us out, got it?"

Hearing the girl's words, the man finally realized that nobody had passed by since the start of their confrontation.

They found out.

He was out of options.

The man retrieved the cup he dropped earlier and drew to his full height.

Wearing a thin jacket, he raised his hands like he was protecting his head — which was what they thought until he suddenly turned towards Leo and dropped his left arm to a 90 degree angle at the height of his stomach.

"Hmph...... The boxing stance known as the Hitman Style? I thought you actually carried weapons of some sort......"

"You idiot, just because he didn't pull one out doesn't mean he's not carrying one!"

Hearing the warning (?) Erika threw out, the man clucked his tongue.

Still, beyond that, he didn't appear to be overly anxious.

He didn't have any need to keep up pretenses.

There was no time for that.

The cowardly middle-aged man who was just screaming had warped into an experienced fighter who was closing in on Leo.

His lowered arm whipped towards Leo and landed blows like rain falling to the earth.

The bullet-like punches came crashing towards Leo's face.

The continuous chain of attacks persisted without pause, which gave proof to the fact that this man was a wolf and not a sheep.

However, neither Leo nor Erika was surprised by this turnout.

Through Erika's insight developed through long years of training and Leo's natural instincts, they already detected that the man's real nature was that of a wolf, no, a highly-trained hunting hound.

With astonishing speed.

Matched with incredible power.

And most importantly, the ability to move at a speed that surpassed human physical abilities without a trace of magic usage.

He had launched dozens of punches in less than 10 seconds without leaving any room for retaliation, so Leo could only move his arms left and right to defend himself.

Finally, there was a chink in Leo's defenses and a fist bypassed Leo's defenses and crashed straight into his face.

Pow, with a sound of a rubber balloon bursting, Leo went flying backwards.

Without wasting any time to verify the result, the man immediately swiftly whirled around.

Using the centripetal force when turning around, he flung a flying dagger towards Erika.

Clang, the crisp sound of metallic impact.

Erika used her police baton to deflect the dagger.

Since she swung her police baton from inside to out, there was an opening in her forward defenses.

Without missing a beat, the man's left fist swung towards Erika's face. However, the police baton pulled back to defend at a speed that surpassed the man's fist, so he pulled back.

Not only did he pull back the punch, the man's entire body jumped backwards. —Yet, in the next instant.

"Gah!"

The man's back took a direct hit from a powerful shoulder tackle and he went face first into the ground.

"......Ouch, that hurt. This guy isn't a normal human being. Still, I didn't feel any machinery during contact...... Maybe he's using medicinal enhancements?"

After applying a tackle from behind, Leo rubbed his chin where he took the hit and murmured at the man stretched out on the ground without letting down his guard.

"......You're in no position to talk. Just then, you definitely took a solid blow to the face."

Compared to the groaning man who was trying to find purchase with his hands, Erika seemed to be more wary of Leo as she said this.

"Of course. After all, as a Magician, a fourth of me is thanks to the research labs. I have no inclination to say that this is entirely due to my natural genes."

Leo chuckled wryly at Erika's piercing gaze and ruthlessly kicked at the prone man's limbs.

"Ooph!"

"Stay down. We don't want your life. We just want to know why you're following us around."

Leo spared a glance at Erika to find her utterly shocked at his barbaric behavior wholly unlike that of a normal person before raising a foot off the ground.

The implication was obvious.

"......Wait a second...... I got it, I surrender...... Originally, I never...... was your enemy...... It's not worth...... getting killed over......"

"That's true. If it wasn't the two of us here, your attack would have killed us for sure."

"Aren't you...... the same......"

Coughing in between his words, the man sat up.

"If I hadn't strengthened my flesh, that hit would've ruptured my internal organs."

The pain must have largely passed, seeing as how the man still sat on the ground but was able to speak more fluently.

"If I didn't think you were enhanced, I wouldn't have done that in the first place."

Leo's tone wasn't concerned in the slightest.

"Regardless, since you're not our enemy, then give us the low down. You can't expect us to keep this barrier up forever."

"OK. It's not my intent to draw attention to myself anyways."

The man seemed to look past all this and sighed in relief.

"Start with your name, since you already know ours at this point."

"Jiro Marshall."

The man answered Leo's question, but there was no way to tell if this was his true name or not.

"I am unable to reveal any details regarding my identity, but I can say that I am not affiliated with any government organization. That is all."

"So you're black ops."

Again, the man didn't affirm nor deny.

"......And then? Since you won't tell the truth even if we asked, then why don't you talk about your purpose as well as the current situation?"

"My task is to monitor the magic high school students and prevent cutting edge magic technology from falling into the hands of the East. I am to take action in the event that magic technology that could constitute a military threat is leaked to the East."

At Leo's impatient urging, the man who called himself Jiro replied back in a business-like manner.

The East was a term favored by USNA intelligence agents and military personnel after the last great war. Even Leo and Erika were familiar with knowledge on that level.

That being said, this did not prove the man's connection with the USNA intelligence community. In order to confuse his affiliation, he may have intentionally used terms specific to a certain region.

"At the very least, your employer isn't someone in this country, right? Why bother with all this?"

Hearing the skeptical implication behind Leo's words, the man shook his head like he was saying "Seriously......".

"And here I thought this country's peaceful naiveté had been cured, though I guess I can't apply the same standard to teenagers...... Military balance across the globe isn't just one country's problem. If this country's technical expertise was handed to the East, then the West's technological advantage may be lost. Regardless of whether it's the New Soviet Union whose interest lies in improving existing Magic Sequences or the Pan Asian Alliance who emphasizes restoration of old magics over advancing modern magic, everyone is searching for new practical applications of technology in magic engineering for military purposes. Not just this country, but the USNA and the nations of Western Europe have seen large increases in spies that target magic engineering. Even your school has become the target of the East as well."

"Peaceful naiveté is an old term from decades ago, and if you really wanted to creepy peeper then you should be more cautious. Didn't we easily discover that you were following us?"

Irritated by the man's smug attitude, Erika ruthlessly attacked the man, but she didn't object to the actual contents of the man's message.

"Exactly. I'm not a spy, I'm just tasked with stopping their activities. Since I'm not your enemy, there's no conflict of interest here."

The man stood up and made a show of brushing off the dirt.

Mockingly — in reality, sarcasm probably made up 30% — the man delicately brushed his pant leg before straightening up.

In his hand was a pistol that could easily be hidden in the palm of his hand. The muzzle was pointed at Erika.

"Tch!"

"You!"

"The fact that I didn't pull this out earlier is proof that I'm not an enemy."

"......Things might get a little hairy if you used a gun. Lots of evidence will be left behind."

At Erika's furious words, the man smiled meaningfully.

"That's true as well. Next, I've said everything that needs to be said, so allow me to bid adieu. May I trouble you to alert your companions to take down the barrier?"

Despite his bantering tone and attitude, there were no weaknesses to exploit in his stance. It would be suicidal for Erika and Leo to press the issue here.

With the advancements in CADs, modern magic could achieve speeds that rivaled firearms on some level. Still, this didn't mean that they were "faster than guns", nor were they even "as fast as guns". When compared to firearms that could fire bullets that pass through the human body with the click of a trigger, modern magic still had to go through the process of reading the Activation Sequence and constructing the Magic Sequence. Though magic had more versatility than firearms, possessed superior firepower and could even provide cover against bullets, that was only under the condition that the speed differential wasn't a problem. When faced with the situation that one bullet could be fatal or render someone unable to keep fighting, "a speed differential on some level" became the difference between victory and defeat. And that was the situation they were faced with right now.

Mikihiko was probably monitoring the situation here with magic the entire time. Before Erika and Leo could reply, Mikihiko already disabled the barrier.

"—And thus I bid you farewell. Oh yes. Allow me to give you two one final suggestion. Please convey to your companions to be wary of their surroundings at all times. Even on campus, don't let down your guard."

As he said this, the man removed a small canister from his coat pocket.

After pressing a button on the canister, he threw it into the middle of the triangle that the three of them formed.

Erika and Leo both leaped backwards at the same time.

With a small explosion, a dense, white smoke rapidly spread outwards.

The two of them closed their eyes and covered their mouths and only opened them after judging that there was no poison involved. By that time, the man who called himself Jiro Marshall had long gone.

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At the Rotbart Cafe in the Yokohama Hills, Inspector Chiba and Fujibayashi were still deep in their conversation. Something had piqued Fujibayashi's fancy, causing her to chatter on to the point that Chiba never had an opportunity to get down to business with the owner. Still, owing to Fujibayashi's skillful verbatim, Chiba was highly invested in the conversation as well. On some level, Chiba didn't feel that speaking with her interfered with the investigation, but his partner Inagaki certainly didn't seem nearly as interested.

Just as Chiba was about to completely forget the reason why he came here, Fujibayashi's cellphone rang. Despite the sound not being loud enough to disrupt anyone else, Chiba still heard it from his seat next to her.

Fujibayashi pulled a smartphone from her bag and glanced at the subject heading. After perusing the message, she turned around and flashed Chiba a secret smile. That smile perfectly displayed her dazzling features that simply put her ordinary makeup to shame.

Chiba's pulse spiked to a rate wholly unbefitting of his age.

"My apologies, Inspector, may I take my leave for a moment?"

Even though Fujibayashi's eyes never hinted at any ulterior motive or hidden meaning, Chiba was immediately able to grasp that Fujibayashi had work to attend to.

"—Oh, of course, by all means."

She rose from her seat and nodded in greeting to Chiba, passed her credit card to the owner and left for her electric car that was in the parking lot.

Taking a seat behind the wheel, Fujibayashi switched the smartphone display over to the dashboard screen.

Cars that had adopted the palm pilot control schematic had no need for steering wheels. This was a natural course of events for a system that incorporated acceleration, deceleration, and directional control entirely. The palm pilot control schematic was used to create a more direct driving experience and especially to avoid blind spots by switching the traditional dashboard for a varied control panel (such as a larger display monitor with multiple functions). With a few extra modifications in place, technological prowess in the car could match that of a workstation at home.

However, Fujibayashi's personal vehicle was equipped with a system a level, maybe several levels higher. Although this was a small two seat sports car, it had the same processing power as that of a combat command vehicle. Equipped with a highly sensitive and powerful communication device, whenever Fujibayashi added her magic to the mix, the sheer electronic warfare capabilities at its disposal certainly deserved the title "Electronic Combat Vehicle".

"Looks like Tatsuya's friends ran into a little bit of trouble."

She wasn't unconsciously murmuring to herself, but using that specific term to target her magic. By using Tatsuya's "connections" as markers, she was overlapping the information dimension with the electronic intelligence network.

"Yoshida Mikihiko, the one-time prodigy of the Yoshida Family. Even though there's some degree of improvement since his adolescent years, I still wish he would pay more attention on the streets."

Names are a symbol of the actual body, so once the name was spoken, then one could home in on the actual body. Closely related individuals, essentially people who are closer on a mental scale, can be used as markers for magic by setting their movement, status, and names as specific variables.

"Even Ancient Magic will leave traces in the observation system."

Compared to modern magic, Ancient Magic, especially SB Magic, was much more difficult to capture by the cameras of the observation system. The difficulty wasn't that it was harder to catch the magic being invoked since the cameras would still record it, but determining who was the one wielding the magic in the first place. The emergency mission that Fujibayashi was currently tasked with was to overwrite the areas where the magic was recorded.

Even though erasing recordings for the improper use of magic wasn't within Fujibayashi's job description, she knew very well that it was integral that the people surrounding Tatsuya didn't stand out too much. If there were too many flags being raised, the prey would be on guard and no longer continue its pursuit. In other words, Kazama and company were using Tatsuya as bait—

(—On that point, I doubt you would mind.)

With these words in mind, the "Electron Sorceress" activated her unique ability.

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The operative from an unknown country called Jiro Marshall stopped running after using his enhanced legs to run the distance between bus stops. He stopped running at such a dangerous speed that would draw attention to himself not because he judged it to be safe.

Actually, it was the exact opposite.

Even though he was running at a pace that no one could match no matter how hard they trained, something was continuously following behind him. He hadn't verified what that "something" was, but Jiro Marshall was strongly suspicious whether that "something" was even human.

There was no need to check whether it was the pair of teenagers from before. He was not a moron who allowed his opponents who he was in a standoff with to follow him without his knowledge. Regardless of whether his pursuer was a Magician or an enhanced human being, the likeliest possibility was that this was an enemy. As a solo operative, Marshall didn't have a team for this mission. Even if he received unexpected reinforcements, he would still receive a message ahead of time to avoid friendly fire. However, since the start of this mission, he never received any intel of this sort.

(—Where are you hiding?)

Marshall slightly lowered his head to concentrate on listening and, using his extensive expertise, searched for the "aura" that was the most critical aspect of three dimensional sound. There was no way he could fail to detect the man following, no, pursuing him. Even if that guy was hidden, he should still be able to find him, Marshall thought.

Unfortunately, his prediction was entirely incorrect.

Suddenly detecting an unexpected "aura", Jiro Marshall abruptly raised his head.

Directly in front of him, a young man stood there in silence.

Just now, he realized that any noise in front of him had been entirely muffled. Marshall was only able to physically detect the danger thanks to his instincts.

The man was exceptionally tall and well built, but his figure was East Asian. He wore a plain grab that consisted of a pair of gray sports pants and a gray jacket with a black jersey beneath. His features were not particularly eye-catching or ugly. From appearances, he was undoubtedly human — but Marshall had the inkling he was squaring off against a man eating beast.

Seeing the young man's face, Marshall suddenly recalled where he knew him.

"The Devouring Tiger!"

In reality, it wasn't that they had met before, since this was the first time he saw the man face to face.

"Lu Gonghu......"

The name of his opponent that unconsciously slipped from his lips headed the list of targets that he had to watch out for during his mission briefing. Rumored to be the one credited with the highest number of kills in melee combat from the Pan Asian Alliance, he was an S-ranked individual from the Pan Asian Alliance special Ops.

By the time Marshall recovered his wits, he had already raised his right hand to aim the gun at Lu Gonghu. Born of reflex honed by countless hours of training, Marshall's body had long since surpassed his mental facilities.

However, Marshall's finger never clicked the trigger.

Faster than even his reflexes, Lu Gonghu's fingers already pierced Marshall's wrist. The inside of his wrist pierced by the other man's thumb, the handgun slipped from Marshall's hand to the ground.

Marshall could only blankly watch his handgun fall to the earth.

When was his wrist pierced? No, speaking of which, when did Lu Gonghu stand right next to him?

Marshall never caught a glimpse of Lu Gonghu's movement.

As Marshall's consciousness was wallowing in the pain that overwhelmed his surprise, his life had already fallen into eternal darkness.

Lu Gonghu swiftly retracted his right hand from where it was embedded in Marshall's throat.

Even though his fingers were stained blood red, very little blood escaped from the wound.

Using his left hand that was free of any blood, Lu Gonghu removed a stack of paper from his chest pocket and carefully wiped away the bloodstains on his right hand.

Afterwards, he flung the papers soaked in Marshall's blood onto the corpse. During the descent, the paper spread out to a handkerchief's size and fell onto Marshall's corpse.

The blood soaked paper suddenly ignited into flames that were redder than blood. The flames started from the center of the paper and spread outwards in a circular fashion.

Nothing existed within the inside of the circle. No matter if it was the ashes from the burnt paper, the clothes that covered the corpse, or even flesh, nothing remained.

After the flames consumed the paper, they began spreading across the corpse.

And so, the circular flames completely devoured the corpse.

Seeing the corpse vanish, Lu Gonghu turned to leave.

There was nary a human presence at the scene. Regardless of whether it was voices or footsteps, there was no trace that someone had ever been there.

The only thing that witnessed this scene was the broken camera that swayed near the intersection.

Chapter 5

Miyuki was somewhat surprised to see the ugly look that Erika wore when everyone showed up for the arranged lunch meeting in the cafeteria.

"Erika, is yesterday's incident still weighing on your mind?"

Until the moment they separated at the bus station, Erika was extremely irritated that the suspected special agent from USNA intelligence got the last laugh during the final moments. Even though she didn't verbalize her displeasure, her attitude was apparent from a glance.

This was already an incredibly frank admission on her part considering her usual antics where she used a mischievous smile to hide her true feelings. It was simply unheard of for her to brood on this until the second day.

At Miyuki's question, Erika's answer was half confirming and half dissenting.

"It's not simply because we could only watch as he got away."

The words, watch as he got away, seemed to denote her frustration, but apparently that wasn't the full story.

"That guy's words were really worrisome...... Don't let down your guard even on campus, doesn't that mean that some of the students......"

Mikihiko and Honoka didn't participate in the incident back in April so they weren't able to follow, but Tatsuya and Miyuki immediately grasped what was on Erika's mind.

At the time, Sayaka had been an unwitting pawn for foreign agents posing as terrorists.

Even now, Sayaka was unable to put that behind her.

"If we're putting on an encore for that unpleasant business, please count me out......"

Tatsuya was both in the know and understood those feelings, so he made a comment that ran counter to his personality in an effort to take care of Erika's mood.

"Still, it's not like we can arrest them if they haven't even done anything yet."

"That may be true......"

Her sulky tone hinted that she hadn't fully accepted this, but at least he successfully defused her intent to do some snooping around on her own, Tatsuya thought.

Speaking of which, though Erika wasn't a "goody two shoes" by any stretch, when something pertaining to one of her close friends arose, she would "change the subject" even when there wasn't a direct connection.

"Yet, isn't it to our disadvantage to always be reacting? That's not a problem if it's a head-on assault, but theft would be......"

"Not like we can always worry about something like that......"

Tatsuya smiled and shook his head at Leo and Mikihiko's concerns.

"Since we don't carry that data in a terminal on us, there's no danger of physical theft. Originally, it would be strange to worry about theft or burglary on campus, no? Well, discreet photographs aren't out of the question, but that issue wouldn't be restricted to this competition only. To steal data from on campus, it would be more convenient to go after the documents hidden behind lower safeguards, but we're not that silly. Is it possible that we have been misinformed by a suspicious individual?"

"Is that so...... But we still need to guard against the other person directly spying on you yesterday, so be careful."

"I know."

Even though Mikihiko's words were largely bucking against Tatsuya's explanation, he looked like he was satisfied with that answer.

Still, in Tatsuya's eyes, Erika and Leo both gave him the impression that they remained silent because they wanted to say something more, but were unable to come up with any arguments of their own.

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Compared to the 52 representatives selected for the Nine Schools Competition, the Thesis Competition only had three. —The difference in scale was so great that the event almost seemed pointless. Even so, the

Thesis Competition was seen as an important event that rivaled the Nine Schools Competition itself.

One of the reasons was that this event was actually another stage for the nine magic high schools to determine a victor. Especially for schools that obtained undesirable results in the Nine Schools Competition, the desire to erase their old shame became a powerful motivator.

Another reason was that many students were able to participate beyond the selected three representatives.

The greatest difference between the debate and research competitions for non-magic high schools and the "National High School Students Magic Thesis Competition" was that a live demonstration was incorporated into the presentation.

In addition to the thesis presentation, a fully functional magic device was required to display the actual manifestation of the magic. Even though the presentation only required a model, this was no simple child's toy that could be stuck together with glue and papers. The device needed to run reliably, or at least mimic reality — this was the Thesis Competition for magic high schools.

For this, the design of the magic device and the support systems involved, the controlling software, outer frame, required conditions and target production, testing personnel and supporting testers, individuals in charge of safety...... Near the actual deadline for the competition, the Technical Club and Arts Club would naturally join in. Even clubs that work on purely theoretical ideas and students with outstanding grades would be mobilized for the success of the official competition.

The total number of participants for the report preparation exceeded that of the Nine Schools Competition.

Since the official competition was set for the Sunday two weeks from now, not only was the campus filled with sounds of machinery and magic activating, "Self Design" and "Self Study" sprouted up to squeeze more time in. The open area in the quad was swiftly filled to capacity by prototypes, calculation devices, and other machinery. Even consolation squads formed by female volunteers loaded with drinks and snacks entered the fray. In order to support these consolation squads, the Robotics Research Club chipped in the Humanoid Home Helpers as well.

"Ah, there they are."

The person Erika was looking for stood amid the ruckus.

"Hey—, Tatsuya-kun—"

Next to Erika, who was shouting while waving her arms back and forth, Leo turned his body in another direction. Mikihiko chose to simply move two meters behind Erika to a safe distance. The two of them were probably pretending not to know her.

"Erika-chan, please don't bother everyone......."

Mizuki wasn't as brazen as Leo, so she still tugged at her friend's sleeve despite knowing this would do nothing. —As expected, there was no effect.

Seeing Erika waltz over, Tatsuya stopped his hands and smiled wryly as if to say "what can I do", but there were of course people who were visibly displeased by the interruption to the experiment.

"Chiba...... You, should probably take a look at your surroundings."

As one of the guards on station, Kirihara was one of the unhappy ones.

"Eh~, Sayaka is observing too?"

However, Erika's response, or more like her conversation target, was directed to Sayaka, who was standing next to Kirihara.

"What do I even say......"

"Erika......"

Kirihara spoke weakly while Sayaka had a wry smile of her own. Given that he didn't fly into a rage, Kirihara must have matured somewhat.

"You don't look like you're just here to observe, Erika. What's up?"

Still, seeing that the other upperclassmen besides Kirihara were about to burst out, Tatsuya quickly seized the initiative.

"Mizuki got called in to help, so I tagged along."

Erika was always someone who did things her way, but that does not imply she was slow in any way. Noticing the warning, she didn't waste any time with her response.

So that's why, Tatsuya thought as he shifted his gaze to Mizuki, who was frantically apologizing to her senpais from the Arts Club.

"Erika, over here."

Using this opportunity, as strange as it sounds, Miyuki reached out and pulled Erika into the crowd of observers.

Sayaka also left Kirihara's side and sidled along Erika, while the interrupted activation of the magic device was restarted on Isori's signal.

"What experiment are they doing? It looks like a giant light bulb."

A transparent globe with a 120 mm diameter was supported on a stand with four legs, which did give the impression of being a giant light bulb. Of course, in this age, "light bulbs" had long since been retired from household use, so Mizuki tilted her head in confusion at Erika's opinion.

"That is the Low Temperature Ionic Generator we're using for the presentation."

Miyuki obviously knew what a "light bulb" was, but she didn't pay attention to Erika's joke and directly answered her question.

"Low temperature? Weren't we going for thermonuclear fusion?"

Mikihiko, who had also adopted Leo's approach of pretending not to know one another, heard an unexpected term that forced him to abandon this pretense. (Speaking of which, Mikihiko still used formal speech when addressing Miyuki.)

Erika also seemed to remember her physics lessons and a question mark mushroomed over her head after a beat.

"Thermonuclear fusion is a type of reaction, so high temperature is required for the entire process."

"............"

"......My apologies, Yoshida-kun. I am unfamiliar with the details as well, please consult Onii-sama for a more in depth explanation."

Seeing Mikihiko's blank look, Miyuki added on that last sentence, prompting Mikihiko to say "please don't bother" and furiously shake his head back and forth, sending his hair flying.

With a diminutive look at Mikihiko, Erika and Sayaka whispered quietly to one another. They frantically shut their traps when Miyuki leveled a smile in their direction (which didn't reach her eyes).

From the start, Leo's eyes blazed with curiosity as he silently stared at the experimental device.

In the midst of the unconscious silence, Isori sent Suzune a signal.

Suzune started supplying psions to the large, control board-shaped CAD that Tatsuya was operating.

The CAD functioned at a much higher strength and speed than the normal smaller CADs that were carried around and multiple complex Magic Sequences were being activated.

Under high pressure, hydrogen broke down into ions and the separated ions struck against the glass to emit light. Although this was only the simple effect of electricity caused by high pressure, they had already achieved electron separation without providing energy. In addition, in order to allow the electrons to break away from atomic attraction and move towards the outer perimeter, a highly complex spell had to be constantly sustained to change the Eidos.

"......So it really is a light bulb?"

Erika's rude comment that slipped from her lips was fortunately covered by the cheers of "Excellent!", "First phase successful!" and other related celebratory words. The others were the same, with Miyuki smiling quietly as if success was the only possible result, while Leo had two fists tightly clenched before his chest, Mikihiko gripped his arms and nodded, and Sayaka clapped as she jumped with joy.

The glass container continued to give off light for 10 seconds.

By the time the light faded, the excitement also wore off.

That was because they only finished with the largest piece and many more components still needed to be put together. The helpers that congregated for the experiment dispersed back to their stations, but Erika noticed Sayaka was staring in a certain corner.

"Saya, what's up?"

"That child......"

She didn't reply and murmured to herself.

"Hey, what's going on!?"

"Hey, Mibu!?"

In order to catch up to Sayaka, who suddenly burst into a run, both Erika and Kirihara also started sprinting.

Leo was only a half a step behind them.

Wide-eyed with shock, Miyuki could only watch them leave until she noticed the female student with twin ponytails that Sayaka was chasing.

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"Hold it right there!"

Hearing someone call out for her to stop from behind, or maybe because she realized she couldn't outrun the pursuit, the female student opted to come to a halt on the grass in the courtyard.

"What is it?"

Turning around, the question in response was a little stiff. In a sense, her tone gave off a fearless impression.

"You are, a Year 1 student, correct?"

There were no distinctions for grade level on First High's uniforms.

Sayaka's question was based off the other student's face and physical form.

"Indeed. Mibu Sayaka from Year 2 Class E. I am also a Course 2 student like yourself."

The only difference was the lack of the school emblem, the distinction between Course 1 and 2 students.

"......Year 1 Class G, Hirakawa Chiaki."

Upon being asked by an upperclassman to identify herself, the female student unwillingly gave her name.

She could hear more footsteps coming to a stop behind her.

Erika and the others caught up.

And heard that earlier self-introduction.

Immediately, she heard Kirihara murmur "Hirakawa?"

Sayaka was not familiar with that surname, but Kirihara had heard of it.

Still, the reason why Sayaka couldn't let this Year 1 student go wasn't because of her name, so she didn't mind even if she had never heard of this name before.

Sayaka didn't have the leisure to worry about things like that.

"Hirakawa-san, the device you're carrying...... That's a wireless password decoder, isn't it?"

Hearing Sayaka's accusation, Hirakawa Chiaki turned pale and hurriedly hid the terminal in her hand behind her back.

"I know even if you don't admit it. That's because I've used the same model before."

Chiaki's eyes widened in astonishment at Sayaka's words.

Password decoders were malware devices used to steal passwords and, unlike the literal meaning, were also machines used to automatically break into verification systems and steal information. There were no legal uses for that item. In other words, used the same model before implied......

"......That's right. I was also the cat's paw for spies."

A miserable expression spread across Sayaka's face, but even then she continued to press onward as she stared at Chiaki.

"That's why I must warn you. Stop now. The longer you're with them, the more painful it will become."

"......No matter how much I suffer, that's none of senpai's business."

Chiaki turned her face to one side and replied in a cold tone.

An obvious rejection.

However, Sayaka did not shrink back at Chiaki's cold reception.

"There's no way I can just watch and do nothing!"

Sayaka's tone hardened and her eyes turned fiery as she suddenly roared at Chiaki.

"Even though it's been half a year, I still can't stop myself from shaking at times. I don't even realize that I've bit my lip open, or pierced my palm with my nails."

Sayaka was actually shaking as she said this.

"Even though I don't know who you're mixed in with, this I know for sure. They will never take your needs into consideration. They will only use you, then promptly abandon you."

Sayaka's voice was filled with sincerity. She was not being hypocritical, these were her true feelings laid bare.

Nevertheless, the hatred that dwelt in Chiaki's heart ran much deeper than Sayaka imagined.

"Of course I know that!"

That self-destructive voice and hate-filled eyes made Sayaka stop cold.

"It's obvious that the mafia and terrorists don't give a darn about the people they're using. Senpai linked up with these people even without fully understanding that? My apologies for my rudeness, but senpai is so very childish."

Those bitter words clearly conveyed to Sayaka that this Year 1 student was completely different than she was.

Sayaka had a goal she was aiming for, but was taken advantage of when she wasn't sure what path to take.

It was true that she was hopelessly naive. Sayaka never planned to deny that point.

Still, Sayaka didn't believe that this Year 1 student was any more mature than she was.

Even if she could achieve her heart's desire after joining up with criminals, what would she do afterwards? What then? Would she return to high school as if nothing had happened, or actually continue acting as a member of a criminal organization? Sayaka knew that this Year 1 student never even took her future into consideration.

Right now, she was only stubbornly refusing to listen to anyone else's words.

"Even if you continue on this self-destructive path you will obtain absolutely nothing. Nothing will remain behind!?"

However, Sayaka wasn't going to back down. There were some things that needed to be stopped, by force if necessary. This was something she learned first hand.

"Senpai wouldn't understand. I'm not teaming up with those guys because I want to get something."

Regardless, the answer she received was almost naturally a powerful rejection.

She's refusing to be persuaded, Sayaka faintly realized. That's because she too was once like that.

Persuasion can be saved for later. If they let her escape now, this child will never be able to return to "this side" again. With this in mind, a slightly forceful approach couldn't be avoided. —Sayaka made her decision.

"Kirihara-kun."

"Ah."

Kirihara immediately grasped Sayaka's intention.

Unfortunately, neither of them were carrying heat, but they weren't particularly worried.

This Year 1 student had no experience in martial arts or close combat. Both of them possessed the ability to tell this at a glance.

If they both attacked at the same time, the takedown should be fairly simple.

Objectively speaking, Sayaka and Kirihara's judgement would be correct. —Under the condition that their opponent was unarmed.

The instant Sayaka and Kirihara advanced together, Chiaki hurtled a small container.

"Get down!"

Erika was the first one to notice.

Both of them flung their arms up on reflex.

A furious flash passed through the gaps in the arms to scour the eyes through the eyelids.

If anyone could still keep their vision through the blazing light, they would notice that Chiaki's eyelids were painted black.

She used light screen paint disguised as mascara and eyeliner to blunt the effects of the flash bang.

Chiaki pointed her right arm at Sayaka. A spring-loaded dart came flying from her sleeve.

Erika successfully blocked the flash and managed to deflect the fusiform dart with a tree branch she grabbed somewhere.

A light purple smoke emitted from the broken dart.

The second after Erika threw the tree branch, she quickly flung away Sayaka and used her shirt sleeve to cover her mouth. Kirihara, who hadn't entirely recovered from the flash bang's effects, directly breathed in the spreading smoke that was rapidly turning transparent. He swayed briefly, then collapsed to the floor in a boneless heap.

(Nerve gas!?)

Erika didn't verbalize this as she mentally clucked her tongue.

Their opponents were better prepared than they thought.

Since they were forbidden from carrying CADs on campus, personal speed buffing wasn't going to be very efficient.

Despite their numerical advantage, the difference between weapons and no weapons was insurmountable. Under the situation where the enemy weapons remained unknown, they couldn't strike recklessly—

—However, there was a man present who didn't subscribe to that theory. Crouched in the grass (the result of Erika warning to get down), Leo suddenly rushed at Chiaki.

Faced with that sort of pressure, Chiaki couldn't suppress a scream.

She frantically pointed her right arm at Leo.

Maybe the darts were a repeating model, or maybe there were other weapons prepared.

There was no way to tell at this stage.

Suddenly, Leo's figure disappeared from Chiaki's vision.

Chiaki stood there transfixed for a moment before her waist was subjected to a powerful impact, causing her to helplessly fall backwards and culminating in her losing consciousness when the back of her head hit the ground.

"......Did I overdo it?"

Leo had used both arms to tackle Chiaki to the ground, then rose slightly and turned his head to ask.

"Yeah. ......Speaking of which, hurry up and get up this instant. You look like you're going to rape her."

"Idi......! Don't even joke about that!"

"Yes, yes, I know."

Erika's gaze was dead serious as she watched Leo look up at her in shock.

That gaze was the same as a professional gambler gauging the merits of a thoroughbred at the derby.

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Hearing that an incident broke out, Kanon (as the Public Moral Committee Chief) hurried to the infirmary and sighed when she found an unconscious Year 1 student in bed and a pair of Year 2 students seeking treatment.

"You guys went too far......"

Hearing Sayaka's explanations of the proceedings, Kanon sighed once more.

It wasn't Kirihara and Sayaka's intention to be told "going too far" by Kanon, who was prone to doing so herself, but since the person in question was unconscious due to a blow to the back of the head, they weren't in any position to refute that.

"So what did she do? Based on your earlier words, the only thing she was doing was holding an illegal electronic device, so I don't think she broke any laws or school rules."

This was also an indefensible point.

On one hand, there was the earnest Sayaka and on the other hand, there was Kirihara who couldn't come up with a defense.

Still, there was someone present who wasn't so easily cowed by these strong words.

"Isn't holding an illegal hacking tool enough grounds for an arrest?"

Faced with Erika's provocative words, Kanon watched her with piercing eyes.

"......I'm saying that going overboard is the issue here. Crime and punishment need to be carefully balanced."

"That's nothing~, not like we caught her because she needed to be punished. I just wanted to protect a peer that's being used by filthy adults."

"So you protected your peer by knocking her out. She was struck in the head."

"There's nothing we can do if she pulls out a concealed weapon and resists. I'm not naive enough to help other people even at the cost of personal injury."

Kanon and Erika glared furiously at one another.

Seeing this explosive situation unfold, Sayaka started to panic slightly. However, since the doctor on duty who should have interposed chose not to, she couldn't just jump in.

"Anyways, Chief Chiyoda, we'll leave everything to you."

The one who interjected was Leo, who was leaning against the wall.

"Let's go."

"Hey, what's with you all of a sudden?"

Erika, who was being tugged away by the collar, directed her ire towards Leo.

Still, she wasn't glaring at him this time.

For an instant, Leo wore an irked expression, then swiftly turned around.

"Everything afterwards is a job for the Public Moral Committee members. I don't care how you guys take care of it, I can only try to prevent any problems from spilling over to Tatsuya, Mizuki, and Mikihiko."

"Just wait a second!"

Erika shouted as she chased after the departing Leo as she too left from the infirmary.

After the sounds of the noisy Year 1 students (which included a particularly irksome Year 1 student) faded, Kanon finally calmed down.

She once again studied the face of the Year 1 student lying on the bed. Even though the face poked something in Kanon's memory, she was still unconscious and unable to verify any of her suspicions. Just like that, Kanon turned to the doctor.

"Sensei, what is this child's status?"

Hearing Kanon's question, Dr. Yasuyado Satomi smiled gently.

"Don't worry. There are no abnormalities in the brain or skull. She'll wake up in time."

Yasuyado was a doctor with unique abilities who could see the abnormalities within the body through physical radiation. She could make a more accurate diagnosis than high tech equipment at normal hospitals by simply looking at the subject.

If she said there was no problem, then it was safe to relax.

"Sorry for bothering you, but could you please let me know when this child regains consciousness."

"Of course? Ah, but don't complain if this child runs away, OK? I have no combat ability whatsoever."

Seeing Yasuyado's half joking answer, Kanon smiled and nodded.

"Sensei surely wouldn't allow an injured student to just run around."

And so, Kanon led Sayaka and Kirihara, who had already finished treatment, and departed from the infirmary.

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Kanon was both the Chief of the Public Moral Committee and Isori's guard at the same time.

Since the Thesis Competition adopted a format where one principal was guarded by several bodyguards, Isori's guards also included another Year 2 male student besides Kanon, but Kanon showed no signs of allowing anyone else in.

Hence her goal was to return to the courtyard where the experiment was ongoing while she waited for the Year 1 student, whose testimony they required, to wake up.

There, she found the same irksome Year 1 student — in other words, Erika — embroiled in another incident. A dark faced young man was reminding Erika to pay attention, whereas Erika was heedlessly whistling with a carefree attitude.

Despite the oncoming headache, she couldn't pretend to not see this either, so Kanon called a nearby Committee member to verify what happened.

"So, Shiba-kun, what the heck happened here?"

While Tatsuya was one of Kanon's subordinates in the Public Moral Committee, currently he served as one of the team representatives in charge of the experiment.

Whether she was a bodyguard or not, Kanon shouldn't have suddenly asked a question of Tatsuya, who was busily typing away at the keyboard, but Kanon didn't realize that right now.

As expected, Miyuki arched a fine eyebrow from her position behind Tatsuya, but Tatsuya didn't display a troubled expression and merely halted the scrolling frames and turned his head around.

"Erika and Leo loitering around seems to have incurred Sekimoto-senpai's displeasure."

After hearing this and verifying the situation once more, she found that indeed more disapproving gazes were sent towards Sekimoto rather than Erika.

Completely fed up, Kanon approached the bickering duo.

"......Sekimoto-senpai, what's the matter?"

Public Moral Committee members didn't have a term of office, so they kept their positions unless they personally resigned. Using the changing of the guard in the Student Council as a reason, both Mari and Tatsumi had handed in their resignations while Sekimoto remained with the committee.

Currently, he was the only Year 3 student in the Public Moral Committee.

"Chiyoda...... No, it's nothing in particular. They're neither Public Moral Committee members nor helpers sent by clubs and simply loitering around, so I want them to make sure not to obstruct the bodyguards."

Even though this wasn't her personality, Kanon really wanted to hug her head and heave a long sigh. Why was this senpai rocking the surface like this, those were her unadulterated feelings.

"......In preparation for next year or even the year after, there is no reason to prevent Year 1 students from learning from this experience. If they are causing problems for the guards, we as the guards will make sure to take note of that. Sekimoto-senpai, since you haven't been selected as one of the substitute guards this year, please leave this area to us."

At Kanon's words, Sekimoto's eyes sharpened, but Kanon never gave him a chance to respond and turned over to Erika.

"Can you two leave now? From another perspective, your earlier actions could be constituted as violence from four people against one person."

Seeing Kanon trying to use the earlier incident to keep this one under wraps at an early stage, Erika smirked coldly.

Realizing that she was scrambling for a reason, Kanon felt the blood rush to her head at Erika's smile.

Still, the situation would only worsen if she cut loose right now.

Before Kanon, who was clenching her teeth, Erika frankly turned around.

"I guess it's about time to go. Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki, see you tomorrow."

"......I should go too. See ya, Tatsuya."

Seeing both Year 1 students obediently depart, Kanon let out a sigh of relief.

At this time, her terminal vibrated to let her know a new message had arrived.

After examining the contents, she completely ignored what Sekimoto was about to say and doubled back to the infirmary.

"Ah, Kanon, wait up."

Isori, who was currently collecting the data results into an information terminal, frantically chased after her. Although this was plainly abandoning his duties for the experiment, no one present could fault him for that.

Sekimoto peered with interest at the terminal monitor that Isori abandoned. Yet, a hand reached over from the side and pressed the power switch for the monitor.

"Ichihara."

"And here I thought Sekimoto-kun had little interest in practical research."

Facing Sekimoto's angry expression, Suzune replied with a cold poker face.

"......I always believed that it was important to emphasize the basic theories such as Cardinal Codes and spell improvement, which is not to say I'm not interested in practical skills."

"I never intended to slight the basic theories. I feel that in order to reduce the risk accompanying practical use, careful validation of the basic theories is far more important than theoretical research."

"Validation and research is fundamentally different. Research is creation itself. Validation will not push the envelope."

"Research that has no meaning to humanity has no value. Only theories that are of practical use can be called theories."

"Even if they appear to be pointless, researching basic theories will undoubtedly lead to incredible results."

"There is no point in rejecting the small advancements of today to look at the fruits of tomorrow. The future is built on the foundation forged by incremental, practical advances."

Seeing the two of them that were outwardly calm, but actually extremely stubborn as they continued to bicker, Tatsuya suddenly remembered something from the other side of the screen.

He seemed to recall a rumor that Sekimoto didn't place fourth in the school's internal assessment for the Thesis Competition, but second place right behind Suzune. At the time, he felt that Suzune plainly rejected him out of a sense of enmity.

Back then, he was confounded as to why Suzune resolutely refused to allow Sekimoto to join the Thesis Competition, but seeing the two of them going at it like this solved that mystery. In Tatsuya's eyes, Sekimoto seemed to be the more combative one, as if Sekimoto himself believed that he should be the representative for the Thesis Competition.

Being overly proud frequently caused one to lose their senses. Currently, it looked like they couldn't suavely persuade Sekimoto. At the current rate, they would never finish in time. Next time, he might even take direct action. Still, that didn't guarantee that this action would be peaceful or even legal.

— Hopefully, nothing troublesome would ensue —

Although Tatsuya had a strong premonition that such a wish would never happen, he still earnestly desired that such a thing would never come to pass.

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After leaving the school gates, Leo silently followed behind Erika.

Even so, he didn't intend to walk home with her.

There was only one route from the school to the bus station.

It was only he had no pressing business that forced him to move ahead of her.

Leo believed that Erika was the same way.

It was pure coincidence that they were walking in the same direction at the same pace.

"Leo."

Hence he came to a surprised stop when she called out his name.

Erika also halted her footsteps.

"Do you have some time today?"

For a moment, Leo was unable to comprehend the meaning behind those words as he stood there in blank surprise.

At this, Erika suddenly whirled around.

Owing to her physical action, her skirt was raised slightly, but Leo's eyes were glued to Erika's own.

There was no trace of innocence.

There was no trace of mischievousness.

That was a steely gaze that would have cut him in two whenever she pleased.

"Do you have time or not?"

Erika asked once more in a cursory manner.

Finally, Leo removed his shackles.

"......I have nothing important."

"Then spare some time for me."

Turning around once again, Erika slowly plodded forward.

On the other hand, Leo adopted the same pace and silently followed behind.

They looked to be the same as before.

But now, the meaning was entirely different.

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The moment Kanon entered the infirmary, Doctor Yasuyado sent her an amiable greeting. However, when she saw Chiaki tied down to the bed, that "amiable" impression fled from Kanon's brain.

"Sensei...... I thought 'you had no combat ability'?"

This wasn't the first time she unconsciously asked a question regarding something she simply didn't understand.

"Oh, you. This is 'nursing', not 'combat', OK?"

"............" "............"

Kanon was not the only one who silently exchanged a gaze with someone else, nor was she the only one to resist a retort.

"Then...... I would like to ask that child a few questions, so can you please let her go and allow her to sit down?"

"Sure."

As if expressing she knew when to change the topic, Yasuyado smiled pleasantly and released Chiaki. —What would have happened if the conversation kept going, Kanon thought with a chill.

In order to dispel that notion, Kanon gently shook her head and redirected her gaze to Chiaki.

"You OK from two days ago?"

Hearing Kanon ask, Chiaki's eyes widened in shock and she hurriedly tried to hide this by ducking her head. She had only just realized that Kanon was the one chasing her two days ago in front of the station.

"Regardless of whether it was the day before or today, you were really pushing it. Any mistake would have led to a serious injury."

Kanon's words were kind and gentle rather than scolding.

"Still, I can't just stand by and watch things advance to the next level. Precisely because nothing has happened yet, I had to stop you now."

This was the farthest Kanon could step back. As the Chief of the Public Moral Committee, it was because of this position that she felt that there was a special duty towards reclaiming underclassmen. If not for that, based on her personality, she would have long since forgotten this.

"According to what you said to Mibu earlier, your words were that you didn't want to receive anything. So why did you want to steal the research data?"

Even though she was personally searching for the most appropriate words, her opponent was not moved by this.

"......My goal wasn't to steal the research data. I just wanted to change the activation systems for the magic device used for the demonstration so that it wouldn't function. I borrowed the password decoder for this purpose."

"So you wanted our school's demonstration to fail?"

Kanon barely managed to suppress her emotions, but beneath her concerned expression, the flames of fury were building. She dared to choose Isori's performance stage — Kanon's primary motivation — to tamper with. She looked to be especially patient today.

"No! I never wanted it to be just a simple failure! ......Even though I don't want to admit it, that guy could probably repair this kind of damage. That man has that kind of ability. But if he noticed that the device was inoperable just before the match began, surely he would panic. All I wanted was for him to stew over this for a few nights. I just wanted to see his troubled expression!"

"Doesn't that constitute as harassment? ......Fortunately nothing happened, otherwise you might face expulsion."

"That doesn't matter! As long as I can totally surprise that guy! Because I refuse to allow that guy to have things go his way......!"

Chiaki screamed as she started sobbing on the bed.

Kanon helplessly glanced towards Isori.

Isori nodded at Kanon from his position near the bed where he was listening to the conversation and sat on the stool near the bedside.

"Hirakawa Chiaki-san...... You are Hirakawa Koharu-senpai's younger sister, right?"

Her head bowed in tears, Chiaki's shoulders shook from an altogether different reason.

As a member of the Technician Team for the Nine Schools Competition, Isori once met Koharu when serving on the same team.

"You believe it's Shiba-kun's fault that your older sister turned out that way?"

Isori had been present during the incident and knew the real reason why Koharu withdrew from school, so he immediately knew who Chiaki was referring to with "that guy", "that man".

"......What other reason could there be......."

Hearing Isori's question, Chiaki spoke in a low voice like a curse.

"That guy didn't protect Kobayakawa-senpai from her accident. Precisely because that man sat there and watched Kobayakawa-senpai fall, my sister had to bear the responsibility......!"

Isori wanted to put a hand on Chiaki's shoulder, but Chiaki violently shook him off.

Looking at his rejected hand, Isori replied with a bitter voice.

"If that incident was Shiba-kun's responsibility, then I share the blame as well. I did not detect that trap, so including me, the entire team would be to blame and not just Shiba-kun alone."

Isori did not say this to defend Tatsuya. During the Mirage Bat event for the Nine Schools Competition, Year 3 student Kobayakawa suffered an accident and still hadn't recovered her ability to use magic. On this point, Isori felt especially guilty for being one of the Technicians present at the time.

"Don't be ridiculous......"

However, Chiaki kept her head bowed as she ridiculed Isori.

Kanon sprang to her feet, but Isori raised a hand to stop her.

"Even my sister didn't know, so it's not Isori-senpai's fault that he didn't know. But that guy has the ability to detect this. 'That man' said so. But that guy wouldn't lift a finger to help if it does not pertain to himself or his sister!"

This time, Kanon turned a confused expression towards Isori, who mirrored the expression. The two of them were completely unable to comprehend Chiaki's words and attitude. Based on her words, Chiaki was almost praising Tatsuya's ability, almost to the point of adoration or obsession. The two of them were so befuddled that the two of them didn't even notice the words "That man" in her words.

"Even though he can do anything he chooses to do nothing...... That must be it, he must be laughing at the fallacy of others."

Seeing Kanon's eyes that hesitated to speak up, Isori wordlessly shook his head in reply. Isori more or less got Chiaki's meaning. When betrayed by someone whom one had complete faith in, human beings would develop a deeper hatred towards them than to their enemies. Especially like this sort of blind faith.

"In reality, he must be able to freely wield magic, but intentionally tanked his scores to be a Course 2 student, so he could trample the pride of Course 1 and 2 students and ridicule them. That must be it! That guy is just like that!"

"Yes, yes, that's enough."

Kanon and Isori were both struck speechless by these hateful and delusional accusations when a completely carefree voice covered Chiaki's speech.

"I said that's enough. Chiyoda, let's continue tomorrow."

"Yasuyoda-sensei......"

"She'll spend the night at the university hospital. I'll explain to the parents, so you two can go home. There's not much time left today, right?"

Kanon wanted to say something in regards to Yasuyoda's suggestion, but Isori stopped her in time. Instead, the two of them left the infirmary.

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In the twin seat bus compartment, Leo sat next to Erika.

The feeling of sitting in such a cramped situation next to a female peer, even someone like Leo who favored food over female company and action over stillness, wasn't entirely immune to this.

Even knowing the other person was Erika, he still felt a little uncomfortable.

No, he was uncomfortable precisely because this was Erika.

Objectively speaking, Erika was also a rare beauty. Maybe it was her natural figure or the result of martial training, but her rough sitting posture with one elbow braced on the window sill had a beauty all of its own.

Additionally, he could smell the faint, sweet smell unique to young maidens that came wafting over.

She was sitting right there looking outwards, but he couldn't just ignore her, so Leo found his gaze periodically drifting back to Erika.

Leo was starting to regret climbing on board without asking for the destination.

Fortunately, this awkward silence didn't last for much longer.

"......Don't you think it's too simple?"

"What do you mean?"

Leo privately sighed in relief when he was able to respond normally to this sudden question.

"Yesterday, we received intel from an unidentified foreigner claiming we were infiltrated by spies. Today, we found a student holding spying equipment. A student engaged in blatant, clumsy antics that just screamed 'come and find me'."

"Clumsy...... I think we spent a lot of time and effort."

"Idiot. We spent that catching her. Normally speaking, she was simply too reckless walking around with that kind of hacking tool in broad daylight."

"She is an amateur after all."

"Really......"

In regards to the words Leo spoke without thinking through, Erika vaguely nodded her head but didn't look entirely convinced.

"So what is it."

Leo finally noticed that Erika's strangely obsessive attitude wasn't something that could simply be treated as a joke.

"It's not over yet...... That child is only the sacrificial pawn."

"So she was a decoy to put us off our guard while the real culprit is someone else?"

This time, silence was assent.

"......Then, you wanted me to come along so I could hunt down the real culprit like a detective?"

"That's ludicrous."

After throwing out these shocking words, Erika finally returned to her usual self, which was why Leo relaxed rather than becoming angry. If they were to continue as they were in this cramped compartment, Leo would undoubtedly suffer a mental breakdown.

"I never had that kind of expectation for your cognitive ability."

"What did you say?"

Regardless, he wasn't going to just endure those rude words.

"Neither of us are think tanks. Leave that kind of stuff to Tatsuya."

But she was even referring to herself as the "knucklehead", so there was no rejoinder for that.

"Compared to things we're not suited for, there are other missions that we're more suitable for."

They both thought of it with a "Ping!" as both of them appeared to have the same logic pattern. —No matter how much they wanted to deny it.

"Bodyguards, eh."

—Since their opponents have already taken aim at the Thesis Competition, there's no need to chase after them. When the competition is about to take place, their opponents will naturally reveal themselves.

"Rather than playing defense, this is more like counterattacking."

—We just have to wait for an opportunity.

"Terrifying woman...... You're using Tatsuya as bait."

—So long as nothing major happens.

"Tatsuya can't be killed even if they tried."

—No matter what they try, Tatsuya won't go down that easily.

"Hah, that's true."

—We just have to focus on catching the spies.

Leo and Erika reached an accord through the unspoken words between the lines.

Evil laughter emitted from the cramped compartment.

If Tatsuya heard this he would undoubtedly cut off all relations with them, but fortunately (?) the man of the hour wasn't present.

Still, the laughter quickly faded.

"However, there's still something missing."

In an instant, Erika's expression grew solemn as she spoke.

"Something missing?"

Noticing the serious nature of the topic, Leo honestly parroted back.

"Leo, you're first class material for infantry. If equipped with a short spear or blade in combat, you may surpass even Hattori-senpai and Kirihara-senpai."

Rather than being pleased by such high praise, Leo was more shocked or even flabbergasted.

"You possess superior innate quality, so you would probably triumph in close quarters combat within sight range."

Yet, there was only a few seconds paused for consideration.

"......Then? Since you said innate qualities, then you must be talking about ability now."

At Leo's piercing answer, Erika nodded without betraying a hint of surprise.

"I said there's something missing, right? You lack the ability to take out your opponent in one blow."

"An ability to take out my opponent?"

"Attacks that can knock out an opponent in one attack, also known as finishing blows. A technique that will definitely defeat an opponent and which your enemy fears above all others. A technique that gives you a decisive advantage even if you don't use it. Currently, you don't have one."

"......Do you?"

"Of course. I have a secret sword technique that does not rely on specific tools and can be used to take out an opponent so long as I still have my hands."

"Eh~......"

"You don't have a technique that can definitely kill your opponent, right? The 'Mini-Communicator' Tatsuya made could be turned into a lethal weapon after a few modifications, but even then that's not a finishing blow."

The vehicle turned into a slow lane, which meant they were approaching their destination.

"......That's true. I don't have the ability to kill my opponent outright."

During the incident in April, Leo was only providing support in the back and didn't actually clash with Blanche's members. He didn't have Kirihara and Erika's experiences in violently rending flesh and bone.

"Do you have the will to learn such a technique?"

Erika's firm gaze seemed to see right through Leo.

"Do you have the resolution to stain your hands with human blood? This time, our enemy will be just like that. If we don't have to do anything, then all is well and good. Regardless of whether it's the teachers or our senpais, even Tatsuya would be on hand to take care of this. If you don't plan on being a bystander and want to partake in the danger, then you need to be ready to kill our enemy."

"What a ridiculous question."

Leo didn't even attempt to avoid Erika's gaze and gave a simple, concise answer.

The vehicle decelerated and slid to a stop at the bus station.

Erika opened the doors and stepped onto the platform.

Next came Leo, only to be greeted by the scent of the tides.

Kanagawa is very close to the sea, Leo thought before he could verify the station name.

Before him, Erika came to halt and turned around.

"Then, allow me to teach you."

Behind her, the sun's rays passed over Erika's shoulders.

"Secret Technique - Usuba Kagerou...... I guarantee that this will fit you perfectly."

Erika declared.

◊ ◊ ◊

The sun had already set on the road home leading to the bus station that was illuminated by streetlights.

Today, instead of Leo and Erika, it was Kanon and Isori who walked with them.

"......So that's the motive."

After hearing the details from the hesitant Kanon, Tatsuya nodded in comprehension.

"What is that! That's completely trampling over your good intentions!"

"Strictly speaking, she was projecting her rage onto you?"

Next to the enraged Honoka was Shizuku, who was tilting her head in confusion. For the two of them, Chiaki's words were utterly nonsensical.

"She couldn't live with herself if she didn't do that......"

"She must dearly love her sister...... Even though I cannot condone what Hirakawa-san did, I can somewhat understand her feelings."

On the other hand, Mikihiko and Mizuki responded with almost compassionate words.

Tatsuya observed the interesting dichotomy between the opinions from the Course 1 and 2 students, but naturally he couldn't let anyone know he found this fascinating.

"Even if that's the case, there shouldn't be a problem if we just let her be, right?"

Tatsuya's words weren't directed at this particular incident, but what to do afterwards.

Hearing Tatsuya's opinion, Kanon and Isori both nodded.

"Even though you were the target?"

Kanon's question was intermixed with concern and amazement.

For some reason, Tatsuya looked apologetic as he shook his head.

"Correct...... Everyone was pulled into this because I was the target. Still, this won't constitute a problem since my safeguards can't be broken by the password decoder's brute force methods."

"No, I'm not talking about the operational safety of the device since I also asked the Technical Research Club to look it over, so I'm not worried on that account...... But once they know they can't break through, they'll take more desperate options. Since Hirakawa-senpai is the root cause, if she can persuade her sister then I think that would be for the best......"

With his brows knit — most people would be struck speechless at this (charming?) expression that mushroomed needless worries — Isori provided the most effective countermeasure, but Tatsuya still shook his head.

"Let's end Hirakawa-senpai's involvement right here. Even though they are siblings, she has no direct connection or responsibility for what occurred."

Strictly speaking, the older Hirakawa wasn't entirely unrelated to the reason why her sister went off the deep end.

That's why Isori was so moved by Tatsuya's words to "let the issue drop".

"Eh~, so you are a gentle person."

This wasn't a joke on Kanon's part. She was sincerely astonished.

Seeing the slightly miffed Miyuki duck off where the upperclassmen couldn't see her without a word, Tatsuya shook his head for the third time.

"I just feel that this could become even more troublesome. Also, our recent lurkers are not restricted to only the younger sister of the Hirakawa siblings."

Although they didn't detect any suspicious individuals, Isori and Mikihiko both felt a slight energy fluctuation — an unexpected psion wave.

"......Shouldn't you take bodyguards after all?"

He wasn't shaking because of the dilation in the air but because Isori's face let slip his faltering, which gave proof to the fact that Tatsuya's hint wasn't directed to the obtuse Kanon, as he asked back.

"There's no use. Without someone with Saegusa-senpai's sensory abilities, it will be very difficult to catch the one shadowing us."

Tatsuya shook his head for the fourth time to subtly hint that there was no one they could call on for assistance.

◊ ◊ ◊

In a certain Japanese restaurant located in the Shinagawa District that was neither in the city outskirts nor a high class restaurant in Yokohama, a certain man in his forties and a youth in his mid-twenties met up with another young man in his early twenties.

"My apologies, have you been waiting long?"

The young man seemed to have just arrived. Based on his earlier words, he appeared to be quite embarrassed. Even so, there was no sign he was kowtowing to his guests and was more like a dignified heir of a well-to-do family exchanging polite greetings.

"Ah, no, we've just arrived as well."

The older man replied back. Regardless of whether his words were appropriate, his attitude was arrogant in the extreme. Even if this wasn't entirely coarse, this would still qualify as incredibly rude, but the man in question would have taken any accusations of boorishness or impetuosity in stride. Just like that, the last and highly capable young man in his mid twenties also sat down without a word.

"Let's keep this short, Mr. Zhou."

The older man spoke to the younger man.

"Is that young lady reliable?"

"I can perfectly understand Master Chen's concerns."

Zhou smoothly defused the man's forceful question.

"However, that girl is entirely ignorant of us, so there's no danger of any leaks."

"Oh?"

At Zhou's unexpectedly confident answer, Chen watched him with judicious eyes.

"In that case, then that collaborator did quite well."

"That's the age when they are ruled by passion. They are in a sensitive phase where they wish to display their own value, so in order to make themselves more conspicuous, they rather tell others than be told and wish others to understand them rather than the other way around."

And that was why they taught her this and that, but Zhou didn't mention this as he smiled thinly with a hint of self loathing in his expression. However, his voice never gave a hint of this.

"Since Mr. Zhou said so, then there shouldn't be any problems. Still, I'm still concerned that something should happen on the off chance."

"I understand. I will personally examine the situation soon."

Zhou respectfully bowed, an attitude that pleased Chen very much. Following that, Chen pressed the ringtone button to make his order.

Zhou had long since noticed the sharp gaze from the young man to his side, Lu Gonghu, but the only thing that appeared on his face was a slight smile while his countenance never slipped for a moment.

Chapter 6

During lunch break, the student cafeteria at magic high school differed a little from a normal high school or even a middle school (which may be because institutions for upper class education for children were all the same).

It was filled with disorderly chaos and noise.

Yet, there was a pocket of order within this chaos.

The area around the entrance of the cafeteria suddenly stilled, an atmosphere centered entirely around one person.

In the open student cafeteria, the one who possessed the ability to influence the atmosphere of a single area — or the ability to dominate — was none other than Miyuki, who was putting her beauty on display more often these days.

Completely heedless of the gazes tossed her way by those she passed by, Miyuki directly advanced towards the table where Tatsuya was waiting.

"Onii-sama, I apologize for making you wait so long."

Tatsuya smiled and waved his hand at Miyuki's impeccable etiquette. Behind Miyuki, Honoka nervously dipped her head in greeting while Shizuku gave an imperceptible nod that would easily have been missed if he hadn't been paying attention.

Tatsuya's group would get the table first, followed by Miyuki's group meeting up with them. This format wasn't something decided ahead of time, as the reverse was also a frequent occurrence at a roughly 6:4 ratio.

However, Miyuki almost never failed to join Tatsuya wherever he was.

"Ah, Miyuki. You're here."

"Yes, we just arrived, Mizuki."

As if on cue, Mizuki and Mikihiko returned with their meals.

"Then, I'll go get mine."

Switching places with Mizuki and Mikihiko, Tatsuya stood up and visually urged them "let's go".

Leading three beautiful young ladies towards the buffet area, Tatsuya was subjected to an entirely different sort of stare than Miyuki received.

By the time the four of them returned, the only two people to greet them were Mizuki and Mikihiko.

"Erika and Saijou are still practicing?"

Since she didn't see the two of them, Honoka asked with concern. Still, she wasn't particularly worried, since it's not like everyone was always present during lunch. For example, these past couple of days Tatsuya was busy working on the stage devices (making system adjustments would be more accurate), so he didn't frequent the cafeteria (Miyuki naturally followed Tatsuya).

On some level, based on the relaxed format of modern education, it was quite normal for students to have individual plans after instruction was over.

Honoka's question was synonymous to saying "we have fine weather today", and was only meant to be a conversation starter. —However.

"Ah, those two are probably resting today."

Tatsuya's thoroughly unexpected answer caused a flash of excitement to spark in Honoka's eyes.

"Ah, the two of them together?"

"The two of them together."

Honoka's expectant eyes quickly discerned Tatsuya seemed to misunderstand her words at some point.

Following that, she revealed a mischievous smile and intentionally modified her speaking pattern with a lofty air.

"It might not be an accident, right?"

Shizuku tilted her head and murmured to herself. Despite her easy-going tone, her eyes were also very excited.

"Eh, is that how it is!?"

"Mizuki, even if you asked me, there is no way I would know."

At Mizuki's wide-eyed question, Miyuki could only reply with a wry smile. As Mizuki was in the same class and Miyuki wasn't, Miyuki's response was only to be expected.

"Ah, you're right."

A bemused Mizuki used her eyes to search for a target who would have the answer.

"..........." "..........." "..........."

"Eh? No, I don't think there's anything special about that."

The four women seemed to be in cahoots as all their eyes fell on Mikihiko, who frantically replied back.

"Speaking of which, the two of them went home together yesterday."

And then, Tatsuya threw even more fuel onto the fire.

Wow, Really, Ah, amid the frenzy their friends went into, Miyuki watched her brother with a gentle gaze.

Did you accumulate too much stress? That gaze seemed to ask, but Tatsuya pretended not to see her and turned his head.

"But why would Erika-chan and Leo-kun suddenly need to rest?"

"Indeed. Since it's these two we're talking about, they wouldn't just suddenly fall sick."

After everyone finished eating their meals and proceeded to the after meal tea time, "the two of them resting together" once more ignited their passions.

"I think we're getting worked up over nothing. Still, at least until yesterday, the two of them showed no signs of any abnormalities."

Mikihiko and Tatsuya both arrived at the conclusion that "it's not an illness".

"Of course, there is still an outside chance that is true."

Though Honoka was the one who spoke to Tatsuya, the one who answered her was Shizuku.

"There's also the chance that this isn't a coincidence."

"That's also true."

Probability bounced off probability and Honoka's conversation partner changed from Tatsuya to Shizuku.

"Now that you mention it, if 'not coincidental', would the two of them be engaged in such close behavior?"

"I don't think that's strange even if it did happen, but......"

"Hm, yeah, I think so too."

Shizuku's gaze inquired "what do you think" from Mizuki, hence she hurriedly expressed her agreement.

"But, if the two of them are together right now, what are they doing?"

Hearing Miyuki say this with a gentle tilt of her head, Mizuki and Mikihiko blushed one after the other.

"You two, what are you thinking of?"

"No, no, nothing at all."

"Y-Yes! Nothing at all!"

"Well, forget it."

At their blatantly obvious reactions, Miyuki sighed and turned her eyes back to her brother.

"Well, looks like both of them are thinking of the same thing. Even though there's no evidence in this area, but maybe Leo has his sights on Erika."

Tatsuya joked with a wink.

"Haha, that might be possible."

Miyuki's lips also curled into a smile.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya's abilities did not include the "All Seeing Eye".

Still, he was capable of similar feats.

Just as magic isn't affected by physical distance, sensory abilities through the information dimension are not affected by physical proximity either. So long as the target has been locked on through the information dimension, one could "see" the target no matter how far away they were. For example, a powerful telescope could see the moon's surface, and if it could home onto a lunar landing vehicle, then one would be able to see the status of that vehicle on the moon's surface (in reality, such a powerful telescope does not exist).

However, at this moment, it was pure coincidence that he wasn't secretly watching what Erika and Leo were doing.

"Hey, you're distracted again!"

Erika scolded her opponent who knelt at her feet holding his head.

"~~That hurt...... I've said this enough times! Use your mouth before using your hand! What do you think language is used for!"

"That's because you wouldn't understand even if I said it."

"Don't think for a second that socking me would make it sink in."

And so, Leo's objection slowly lost steam until he finally gave up.

This was partially because he was being taught and had no basis for resistance, but the main reason was the defeatist air surrounding his repeated failures.

"That's true. Let's take a break."

Yet Erika never felt that Leo was incompetent. She likely knew very well how hard it was to learn a new technique.

"Here."

"Oh, thanks."

Erika gave a lukewarm bottle of water to Leo, who had just flopped down on the dojo floor, before standing before him in her kendo uniform.

"You were able to do this when wearing that cloak...... So the situation is that different?"

Erika unconsciously mentioned this aloud, but Leo frowned in displeasure upon hearing this.

"You mean during the Nine Schools Competition?"

No matter the result, his outward appearance was something that Leo desperately wanted to forget. Still, since this had something to do with the technique he was learning, he couldn't just pretend to have forgotten.

"At the time, the cloak wasn't straight like a metal plate, nor did the creases affect its ability to serve as a shield. Looks like some sort of assistance magic was incorporated into the fabric."

Erika maintained her sitting position and rubbed her chin with her fingers.

"Hm~, while we can also add assistance magic spells, it would still be far faster to ask Tatsuya."

"No, don't do that."

Leo shook his head at the words that slipped from Erika's mouth.

"This time, if we bothered Tatsuya then the entire thing becomes pointless. If casting assistance magic is all that's necessary, then let me invoke that spell."

"How manly."

Erika chuckled.

This unexpectedly brilliant smile forced Leo to avert his gaze.

◊ ◊ ◊

Today was Saturday, but school was still in session. Magic high schools haven't adopted the two days off per week format.

Even though he still had to attend class (including practical skills) today, Tatsuya still visited Yakumo's temple. He even had Miyuki in tow today.

Actually, he had been invited by Yakumo to test the renovated "long range ki attack" training grounds.

There were very few locations to train magic shooting with live ammunition. Especially for someone who couldn't use training facilities on campus like Tatsuya ("Mist Dispersal" was definitely out of the question on campus), it would be optimal if he found a local area for shooting practice without heading all the way out to Tsuchiura.

Though Miyuki was different than her brother in that she didn't have to hide her abilities, the campus practice facilities for students and clubs didn't allow her to bring her full might to bear. In addition, the magic she excelled in was closer to wide-area magic rather than targeted sniping. Since she usually lacked a venue or time for shooting practice, Tatsuya pulled her along saying that "this is an excellent opportunity".

The training area was set underground, beneath the main hall for the temple, and occupied quite a large area.

"—Kya! —You!"

They should say as expected of Yakumo's temple, as the secret training area used by ninjas was vastly different than their school's facilities.

Refusing to admit defeat, sweat streamed down Miyuki's face as she was breathing hoarsely.

Having rolled several times, her neat hair had become unkempt.

This was a square-shaped area.

Three of the four walls and the ceiling had numerous holes where targets came out. (They weren't on all four walls because there were very few actual conditions where one was completely surrounded by the enemy. In an actual fight, one should have retreated long before this occurred.)

Each time, dozens of targets would appear, only to hide themselves after one second.

Just trying to take all of them out was a chore by itself, and there was even a devious condition that any remaining targets would retaliate with shots of their own.

Although Miyuki managed to block all the merciless retaliatory shots, there were still multiple instances where she fell down trying to switch between offense and defense.

"OK, let's stop there!"

At the time Yakumo gave the signal to stop the training device, Miyuki couldn't help but powerlessly sit on the floor. The training difficulty appeared to be set a tad too high.

"Good work."

"Ah, Onii-sama, I'm sorry."

Miyuki hurriedly took the towel Tatsuya handed to her.

After handing her the towel, Tatsuya used his other hand to clasp his sister's hand and gently pulled her graceful figure to her feet.

"Ah, thank you very much."

"You appear uninjured."

After taking a look at his sister standing there in a thin training shirt and pants that fell to her knees, Tatsuya smiled as he spoke to his sister, who was getting her breathing back under control.

Miyuki's flushed visage wasn't entirely caused by her recent strenuous activity, though did Tatsuya manage to notice that?

Of course, there was no answer to that question.

Nodding his head at his sister's concise answer of "I'm fine", Tatsuya walked towards the center of the platform.

Miyuki wasn't displeased by this aloof attitude.

They didn't come here to play around.

If she caused her brother to be unduly worried on her behalf, then she was doing him a disservice.

Of course, such a thing would never happen.

As Tatsuya lightly paced forward, he drew his favored CAD before his chest.

He bent his elbow and adopted a ready position.

Without waiting for Miyuki to leave the platform, the training session began without any signal given.

Three of the walls sent out orb-shaped targets.

They were immediately disintegrated the moment they appeared.

Tatsuya reached out his right arm and adopted a shooting position.

He only squeezed the trigger — pressed down on the CAD button only once.

Twelve targets were decomposed just like that.

Not missing a beat, targets shot out of the ceiling and the walls.

This time there were twenty four.

Tatsuya didn't aim at any individual target and merely squeezed the CAD's trigger. Then, he dashed aside to avoid the powdery debris.

As he turned, he raised his right arm upwards and pressed the trigger.

Like they were trying to replace the gaps formed by the ruined orbs, swarms of orbs repeatedly materialized.

Twice, thrice, he continued to squeeze the trigger time and again.

However, even when all the targets had been exhausted, not a single retaliatory shot was fired.

"Onii-sama, that was amazing!"

After the device came to a halt, Miyuki fairly flew towards where Tatsuya lowered his CAD.

"Seriously, a complete victory. Is even that level of difficulty not enough?"

Yakumo followed behind with a bitter expression on his face.

Tatsuya smiled in response to Miyuki and moved towards Yakumo.

"This is my area of expertise after all, but even then it was still a stretch. Who came up with this devious layout that takes advantage of the blind spots?"

"I got the design from Kazama-kun."

"I see, so this is Sanada's work."

Thinking of the technology officer with the candid smile who was one of the wiliest within the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, Tatsuya murmured quietly.

As Yakumo's face relaxed to hide his "so you know" reaction, Miyuki stepped between the two.

"Speaking of which, Onii-sama, when could you handle 36 targets at the same time?"

These words weren't out of concern for her brother but more because she couldn't contain her excitement.

"I remember that 24 was your limit three months ago."

Miyuki was referring to the number of targets that could be sniped by magic at the same time. Even though the Specialized CAD was shaped like a handgun, that did not mean the magic was fired from the muzzle. If this was a Generalized CAD, it might not even be in the shape of a gun.

Modern magic in the form of the Four Great Systems and Eight Major Types relied on Eidos manipulation of the chosen target rather than using magic bullets to shoot at a target. Thus, so long as one could focus on the targeted phenomenon, it was possible to target multiple instances of the same phenomenon.

To accomplish this, each of the replicated targets needed to be defined and considered simultaneously.

Rather than lumping all the targets together and identifying all the phenomena together and changing them at once, magic needed to be applied to each individual target, so it was necessary to identify the subtle differences between each of them.

If the number of the targets was only one digit, then anyone could accomplish this with sufficient training. Anything above that was the realm where qualities other than magic were required, as even adding one target became incredibly difficult.

Miyuki's eyes shone brilliantly. Needless to say, this was her bro-con personality on full throttle.

However, Tatsuya only laughed and shook his head at his sister's question.

"No, although this opponent does actually retaliate, it is more like they were set to wait to retaliate. In live combat without any breaks in between, currently 24 is already my limit."

"Please don't be so humble. Even if that's the case, even with the training set towards waiting to retaliate, I can only manage 16 at a time. Onii-sama is truly amazing!"

"Hey, flattery won't get anything from me. You are capable of using magic at a wider scale than I can, and if you weren't constantly keeping an eye on me, you would be able to do this too. In terms of defense, you are far ahead of me, aren't you?"

"In that case, can't Onii-sama reach even farther than I can by increasing the level of interference?"

Yakumo's wry laughter cut through their enigmatic conversation.

"Hey, you two remember that the walls have ears, right?"

The two of them shared embarrassed expressions, then exchanged knowing smiles.

Afterwards, the siblings left the training grounds in the basement and came to the corridor where Yakumo's room was.

Yakumo was undoubtedly the one who led them here. Even though Yakumo claimed that he would bring them tea after training, the very fact that they were in his private quarters rather than the main hall hinted that this odd gesture entailed something special, Tatsuya thought.

"You two still have to go to school, so I'll keep this short."

After bringing tea for three, Yakumo sat next to Tatsuya and cut to the heart of the matter.

"It appears you have received quite a special item."

While there was no way to confirm that the "special item" Yakumo spoke of was the Magatama, he wasn't overly surprised or astonished. There was no way one could associate with Yakumo if they were shocked by comments on such a level.

"Are you talking about the item placed in my care?"

Tatsuya frankly and directly confirmed that he possessed the item Yakumo spoke of. There was no point in trying to play fast and loose with Yakumo, something that Tatsuya had learned through long experience. Likewise, Tatsuya also knew that Yakumo did not favor individuals who engaged in pointless conversation to discover other people's secrets.

"If that is the case, I advise you to return that as quickly as possible. If you must hold onto it, store it somewhere other than your home."

Although Tatsuya knew that Yakumo would warn him, the seriousness in Yakumo's voice surpassed his expectations. Surprise and anxiety welled up inside his body and he couldn't help but straighten his body in front of Yakumo.

"There's no sign that someone is on to us."

Tatsuya's comment contained the subtle inquiry "Is someone spying on us?". Since he received a painful (physical) lesson during the Sayuri incident, he had begun to prudently monitor the auras around him recently. However, excluding a few minor incidents, at least no major threat like Yakumo hinted at had materialized yet.

"That's because they're being very cautious and not because they're lacking in talent."

Yakumo's reply not only served as a warning to their opponent's capabilities, it also hinted that he was on their trail.

"Who are they...... I suppose it would be pointless for me to even ask."

"Not entirely pointless."

Yakumo's response was entirely theatrical, but Tatsuya did not fret.

On the other side, Yakumo saw that Tatsuya didn't take the bait, so he slowly went with the hook "Hm, in that case......"

"I'll give you another piece of advice, if the enemy appears before you, be very wary of their bearing."

"Bearing...... Is it?"

The one who asked in surprise was Miyuki.

Tatsuya was also curious as to the answer of that question, so he wordlessly glanced at Yakumo.

"The price will be considerably higher if you want to ask more questions."

Yet Yakumo didn't answer Miyuki's question.

◊ ◊ ◊

There were 8 days until the Thesis Competition.

The support level for the live demonstration on stage had practically reached full mobilization for the school.

There were people in charge of creating the components for the device, people acting out the stage performance, people serving as the audience, people who directed transportation and handed out lunchboxes, anyone in the indoor camp who couldn't appear in the Nine Schools Competition was there putting their talents to full use.

On the other hand, athletic students also had their own mission to accomplish and were also giving it their all. Even the core members who usually didn't have to prepare were sweating it out in practice just in case they were needed.

There was an outdoor training facility standing on the remodeled hill next to the school. Magic high schools were not military or police training academies, but there was still a considerable amount of people who progressed in that direction, hence the need for both indoor and outdoor facilities.

Within this artificial forest, Mikihiko hid his presence and watched the upperclassman who was his training partner.

He was hidden within the shadows of the trees, but his opponent stood exposed in the middle of open terrain. Just and honorable, that description fit him perfectly. He was able to intimidate Mikihiko without even looking in this direction.

His training opponent was the Club Activities Group Leader, Juumonji Katsuto.

During this Thesis Competition, Katsuto served as the supreme commander for all security personnel from the nine schools. Since he was to work alongside representatives from other schools, he needed to practice leading from the front in order to inspire the other students selected as security personnel and bolster their morale.

Mikihiko was selected as his opponent largely due to his outstanding performance during the Nine Schools Competition.

However, he wasn't Katsuto's only training opponent.

In the beginning, there were ten against one. Thirty minutes later, seven had already been defeated.

Mikihiko had already launched several long range attacks, but even though he hadn't received a single attack yet, he was already covered in sweat.

And cold sweat to boot.

(Too anxious, eh.)

When he heard that he had been selected as a training opponent, he almost leaped for joy. A Year 1 student, and a Course 2 student too, who had not joined any magic competition club would have found it nearly impossible to beg for the opportunity to serve as the training partner for the Juumonji Family's next heir.

Not only did he nod in thanks to Sawaki, who brought the news, he also vigorously bowed.

Of course, he knew very well that he couldn't stand on an equal footing with Katsuto. Thus, he planned to give this his all and learn from this experience.

However—

(Relax. This is mock combat.)

From the very start, Mikihiko constantly reminded himself of that.

Katsuto was holding back. None of the seven defeated individuals suffered serious injury. Even with that in mind, Mikihiko was almost crushed by the pressure Katsuto was exerting.

This wasn't because Mikihiko felt that he was weak, but because he felt the overwhelming pressure radiating from Katsuto. Three minutes ago, a Year 1 student from the Hundred Families panicked in the face of that pressure and was defeated after recklessly attacking.

Without noticing it, Mikihiko's breath became ragged. The sound of his breathing had risen in volume until it was easily discernible.

He quickly noticed this problem and hurriedly hushed himself.

Only two or three sounds escaped during that interval.

Even indoors, this was a volume that would not travel more than 1 meter out.

Despite that, Katsuto's eyes truly drifted towards the trees where Mikihiko was hiding himself.

Cold sweat ran down Mikihiko's back again. Slowing modulating his breathing, Mikihiko concentrated everything on his sight and hearing.

He didn't have the courage to use magic to find out. Even if his opponent knew where he was, he didn't have audacity to announce himself unless his opponent directly saw his face.

He used his ears to carefully discern the air flow.

Through the fabric of his pants, he could feel the slight vibrations in the earth through his knees, but this wasn't enough.

He used his eyes to read the slight fluctuations that wouldn't disrupt the air flow, his nose and tongue to taste the changes in the chemical ratio within the air itself.

Mikihiko raised his five senses and combined that with his sixth sense to get an accurate reading of the situation.

Betraying neither a hint of anxiety nor extreme caution, Katsuto steadily advanced to Mikihiko's location.

(Three, two, one, now!)

Mentally counting down, Mikihiko pressed his right hand into the earth.

He transmitted the signal down the line and pumped psions into the magic formation.

The conditionally activated magic that he planted before hiding in the shade activated upon receiving the psion surge from the caster.

In order to hold Katsuto, four pillars of earth erupted around him.

These pillars were to his southeast, southwest, northwest, and northeast; they were the perfect positions for the four gates of earth, man, heaven, and demon.

In the next instant, the circular area where Katsuto was standing suddenly sank into the ground.

Ancient Magic "Earth Pit".

This was not a technique that concealed himself within the embrace of the earth, but a spell that plummeted the enemy into an earthen tunnel, disrupting the senses and hampering movement to buy time to escape.

Against an inferior opponent, this would be sufficient to completely restrict their movement and capture them. However, Mikihiko wasn't optimistic enough to believe that he could achieve anything beyond buying time with Juumonji as his opponent. Mikihiko wasn't self-delusional about his own abilities.

Without wasting time to verify the effects of the invoked magic, Mikihiko fled at full speed.

Which was the correct judgment.

After the dust cloud passed, a pile of dirt stood within the round chasm in the earth, and Katsuto could be seen standing there without a speck of dust on him.

His barrier had completely blocked the attack that used the earth as a medium.

Still, it was also true that he lost visual on his fleeing opponent.

Katsuto smiled slightly and used his barrier's reverse reaction to slightly float up and return to the surface.

In order to prevent accidents and provide medical assistance, there were people manning the indoor and outdoor observation cameras during magic mock battles.

"Heh~......"

Watching the monitor, Mari sighed.

The fact that he could survive this long as a Year 1 student was a testament to Mikihiko's abilities.

His superlative ability that surpassed the boundary between Course 1 and 2 students had already been proven during the Nine Schools Competition.

Yet, seeing him in live combat again, it was easy to see that the effects of his unique way of applying magic far exceeded expectations.

"He possesses a different caliber of talent than Tatsuya-kun. We have a lot of interesting students in this year's batch."

Mari's lips curled upwards at Mayumi's words.

"If we had to separate them out, how ironic that the more interesting ones are Course 2 students."

Hearing this, Mayumi revealed a sour smile.

"That's incorrect, Mari. In terms of combined skills, the number of talented Course 1 students is still higher. We're getting this impression only because there are several unique ability users who are particularly conspicuous."

Mayumi's explanation was right on the dot, prompting Mari's nod with an air of "I see". Then she once more directed her gaze to the monitor.

"Still, that guy is undeniably more 'useful' than the other Year 1 students. Nicely put, birds of a feather flock together."

"With the experiences from the Nine Schools Competition under his belt, even the teachers have remarked on Yoshida-kun's massive improvement. I wish that sort of positive influence continues to spread."

"That guy isn't the type to exhibit leadership qualities."

"If I had to say, he's the type that mass produces enemies."

On the monitor next to where Mari and Mayumi were exchanging wry smiles, Mikihiko had been forced into a corner and was making his last stand.

◊ ◊ ◊

In the dojo that belonged to the Hundred Family's "Magic Swordsman" Chiba Family, Leo also directly came here today instead of going to school.

Including the small break for lunch, Leo spent six hours sweating and swinging a bokken. The bokken he was swinging had a metal core and even the usual swordsman could only use it for three continuous hours. Even Erika, who was usually highly critical towards him, could express her amazement at Leo's incredible physical stamina and mental concentration.

"OK, let's stop."

Leo halted his hands at Erika's signal and let out a deep breath.

He accepted the towel Erika offered him and mopped at his sweat.

"You're really going at it despite having no experience with swordsmanship."

Her words were not gentle, but Erika's tone didn't carry her usual teasing tone and was purely an expression of her opinion.

Although Leo understood this very well, he still shrugged his shoulders and answered in his usual cursory manner.

"Compared to everyone here I'm definitely rated as a newcomer. Even if I haven't swung a sword, normal club activities often use ice picks and clamps."

"Ice picks I understand, but clamps? ......What the heck is the Mountaineering Club doing?"

"On that point, I don't find anything particularly odd....... From an endurance perspective, I suppose both sides are equal."

Just as he said, Erika wasn't just standing there watching Leo swing a sword. She stood opposite Leo and swung a sword to demonstrate the motion. Leo was watching Erika's motions and doing his best to replicate hers.

"My bokken is lighter, and I would quickly give up if I was swinging the same thing you are."

Erika tossed the bokken she was using to Leo as she said this.

Frantically catching the bokken Erika suddenly tossed to him, Leo used one hand to lightly swing the blade to check its weight. A befuddled expression spread across his face.

"It really is light...... However, being too light makes it difficult to wield with two hands."

"There's a method behind the madness."

Erika's response was neither humble nor cute as she used a hand to wipe away at the sweat on her face. Owing to the heat, she tugged the collar of her kendo uniform to fan some air. Even though her undergarments and flesh weren't visible, Leo still turned his face in another direction.

Since he paid extra heed to avoid Erika's detection, even if she saw Leo's suspicious behavior, she wasn't embarrassed in the slightest. The two of them had been classmates for over half a year, so Erika knew that although Leo was a youth with a brusque appearance, he actually had a surprisingly innocent and stubborn streak. In Erika's estimation, even if the women's changing room hadn't been latched completely and left a crack, Leo was the type that wouldn't take a peek even if he was alone. That being said, Erika was still irked by Leo's attitude when he obviously averted his gaze.

"......Where the heck are you looking!?"

"Ah?!"

Leo faltered at Erika's displeased gaze and question.

"Ah, n-nothing, I didn't see anything!"

Leo's panicky state only served to compound Erika's embarrassment. She was still a pure maiden at heart.

"I know you didn't see anything! What I'm telling you is to not glance all over the place with no reason!"

"Oh, err, sorry."

An awkward silence occupied the space between the two of them. Nevertheless, Erika wasn't the kind of person to be hesitant with words.

"......Let's start the next training phase."

Under Erika's hawkish gaze, Leo didn't look overly harried and managed to relax.

"It's about time to practice slashing the straw dummies."

"Correct, come over here."

Erika led him to the next room where a network of straw bundles awaited them. This room was set up to accurately reflect the impact of the blade depending on stabbing or how the blade made connection. In order to maximize the realism behind each swing, there was no way to bring out its full potential without this setup. These conditions were integral in order to teach Leo the technique "Usuba Kagerou".

"Here, this is a real sword, so be careful."

This time there was no way she was going to toss it, so Erika held the center of the hilt and handed the drawn sword to Leo.

Using his right hand to clasp the bottom of the guard and the left hand to clasp the end of the blade, Leo received the sword with two hands.

"You remember the steps?"

"Yeah. First I horizontally slice the top of the stalk, then I need to stop in order to make the second slash. Then execute the second slash, and the third. After five slashes I move to the next one from the left side to the right side."

"Correct. I'm going to take a break inside. Let me know when you reach the one on the far right."

"What do I do with the sword?"

"The scabbard is by the door."

Erika said so as she pointed at the door.

Since Leo just saw her draw the blade, there was no reason to actually verify this once more. Still, as if to placate Erika, he still directed his gaze in the direction she was pointing.

Given that the scabbard could maintain the sword, the scabbard must possess the function to clean off the grit and apply oil. Upon hearing Leo's confirmation, Erika lightly waved and left the room.

Full of spirit, the sword slashed downwards.

In the beginning, there were occasions where the blade was caught because he didn't apply enough force, but near the end he was able to split them apart in one blow. With the last one done, the task Erika left for him had been completed. He probably took around 10 minutes to accomplish this, which caused Leo some confusion.

That was almost too easy — this was where Leo felt something was awry. Erika said to get her once he was done and left the room, saying she wanted to take a break. In other words, in Erika's estimation, this assignment was supposed to take a considerable amount of time. Yet, he only took enough time to finish a cup of tea to finish this. In that case, Leo came to the conclusion that he must have made an error somewhere.

Nonetheless, he wasn't clear exactly where he went wrong. Did this happen because Erika miscalculated Leo's abilities? After some thought on the matter, he still didn't have a viable answer. Fortunately, Leo wasn't the type to waste time and energy on something like this. Since he didn't have all the information to arrive at an answer, any further consideration was a waste of time. Erika had said to "call her when he finished", so even though he "finished" outside of her calculations, Leo ultimately decided to go get Erika anyways.

As instructed, he replaced the sword back in the scabbard and left the room into the adjoining corridor, only to realize that he never asked where Erika currently was. Even he was surprised at this silly turn of events. As he quietly ridiculed himself, he glanced around looking for a HAR terminal, but couldn't see anything like that. Still, even if he did locate one, he didn't have the authority to request information and might even be seen as a suspicious individual, a thought that prompted Leo to abandon looking for a terminal.

If he returned to the dojo, someone might be able to point him in the right direction, Leo thought as he retraced his footsteps and ran across a young woman who came from the main house. She was approximately in her mid twenties and dressed in a kimono (Leo wasn't familiar with this type of clothing), hence Leo wasn't able to tell if she was single or married based on her wardrobe. Her features weren't particularly distinctive, but her stern attitude would be out of place on a servant. Not that this household had any female servant her age.

"Ara, an unfamiliar visage."

That domineering gaze solidified the idea in Leo's mind that she was from the Chiba Family. Although she didn't look like Erika, if Erika's features came from her mother, then this woman's features must come from their father.

"Ah...... You must be Erika's classmate."

In spite of the amiable words, Leo's ears didn't detect a trace of kindness in them. Their sibling relationship — Leo assumed that the woman before him was Erika's older sister — appeared to be quite hostile, he thought.

"Saijou Leonhart."

Regardless, even if it's the Onee-sama whom she was on a bad footing with, Leo's attitude wouldn't change. Leo knew that putting on an act would only reflect poorly on him.

"Actually, Erika-chan asked me to call her after I finished my assignment."

The only reason he said this was because "calling her by name would be bad", except his tone changed entirely due to his anxiety. Nevertheless, Erika's sister didn't seem to reveal that special brand of interest unique to most women.

"Did Erika-chan say where she was staying?"

It appeared that she was more concerned about the topic in question than those details. Was she the serious type? Still, this didn't feel like that was the only reason, Leo thought. —Not that he had any basis for that statement.

"She just said she wanted to take a break."

"Oh...... In that case, she must be in the lounge."

Erika's sister (for now) said this as she pulled out a small terminal from her sleeve pouch. After tapping the board a few times, she handed it to Leo with a "I'll lend this to you for now".

"Follow the displayed instructions and use this to open the door."

"......Is it OK for me to hold onto this?"

"Erika was the one who told you to get her, correct?"

"Yeah......"

Although there were still a few things that eluded him, this truly provided much needed assistance in his search for Erika. Thus, he accepted the terminal and said something vague like "As you please" to Erika's sister (for now), and headed towards the dojo.

"Now that I think about it, this house is huge......"

Just now, he had hesitated briefly over borrowing the terminal, but now Leo believed that "it was a stroke of good fortune that he did borrow it". —Of course, this was referring to the terminal Erika's sister (for now) lent him.

The reason he thought so was because the route to the lounge was quite difficult to find. It was almost as if he had taken a longer detour, but Leo felt that this was probably just the layout of Erika's house. Regardless, Leo finally stood before the door leading to the lounge after a five minute walk.

Even though all he had to do was enter, Leo still had some concerns. Erika was neither his kin nor lover and would likely only rate as close ("close" in terms of acquaintances, but words were insufficient to convey that here) classmates.

He should still knock.

"Hey, Erika, are you inside?"

He let out a shout when no one answered the knock, but still no one responded.

Is she really here? Despite his misgivings, if this was an empty room then he had nothing to worry about. Leo placed the terminal in his hand alongside the reading device.

After a brief electric sound, the lock disengaged.

A sound rang out from within the room.

What now, was she inside all along? Leo thought as he opened the heavy door that didn't have a door knob.

Immediately, he heard someone shout "Wait! Wait a second!"

"Eh—!?"

A ridiculous sound erupted from Leo's throat.

Not that he was aware of it. The current Leo had no leisure time to worry about something like that. His entire body was frozen to the point that he didn't even realize he should shut his eyes at this point.

Of course, his opposite number across from him was the same.

Directly before Leo's gaze, Erika maintained a posture that was about to turn around.

This was the scene before Leo's eyes.

Erika's modesty was only covered by a single bathing towel. Not only was her posture thoroughly unnatural, the knot in front of her chest was also loose.

Next to her was a reclining massage chair. Erika was probably lying there up until the moment he came in.

Behind Erika, there was plainly another door with a door knob on it. It was only now that Leo finally realized that he had come through the emergency fire escape.

The towel around Erika's chest chose this moment to come undone.

The flow of time swiftly slowed down to a crawl. Nay, more like his consciousness became many times more focused.

Erika grabbed the slowly drooping towel.

Meanwhile, Leo's body finally broke free of its confinement.

"Ah."

"Don't just stand there and drool like some sort of Peeping Tom, you idiot!"

Far swifter than Leo's apology, her barbed tongue sent a hurricane of feminine fury broke over Leo.

"That devious woman...... I must have been a moron to think that she was the older sister......"

On one side, there was Erika muttering swear words under her breath while kicking the massage chair, while on the other side, Leo was sporting a bright red hand print on his face. This was the result of Leo fully accepting Erika's request that "No matter what, I still need to hit you". The reason she used the palm instead of the fist was because Leo was also a victim of fraud here, and definitely not because Erika disliked a stinging pain in her hand.

Leo had no complaints regarding that slap. The fault for this incident was entirely on him. Although Erika was only in such an unguarded state and relaxing on the massage chair because she miscalculated the time Leo needed to complete his assignment, that was an entirely different issue than the undeniable fact that he was the one who had opened the emergency exit. Although he barely avoided seeing any critical pieces, that certainly didn't relieve him of any responsibility. Looks like he better head back for today, Leo thought as he decided to apologize to Erika one more time.

"Erika." "Leo."

In the end, both of them called out each other's name at the same time.

"Leo."

The moment Leo wilted a little at Erika's piercing stare, Erika once again called out his name.

"Immediately forget what you just saw!"

No matter how much that request made sense, Leo still found that to be a tall order. One couldn't simply white wash one's memory that easily.

"—Even though I know that's quite unreasonable."

However, despite the easily understood meaning behind these words, Leo couldn't dispel the trepidation that refused to allow him to relax.

Also, his premonition swiftly became reality.

"How about, in order to prevent you from having any spare time to think of those unnecessary things, I need to seriously train you from this point forward. I'm going to go over basic swordsmanship as well as Usuba Kagerou."

Even though this was important enough to warrant Erika repeating this one more time, Leo was terrified of Erika's chilly aura and didn't dare to open his mouth.

"Starting today, why don't you just sleep over here."

"......I didn't bring a change of clothes."

Leo had mustered everything he had into those last words.

"We can prepare undergarments over here. Money isn't an issue."

Still not having vented all her displeasure, Erika gave Leo another hearty kick after speaking.

◊ ◊ ◊

Even in the evening, First High's campus was still filled with the vibrancy of student activity. The noise nearly rivaled the level when the school festival comes around. Magic high schools incorporate a format that not only demands high quality secondary education but also includes magic education as well, hence the lack of a school festival. This is primarily because there is simply not enough time to allocate towards that during the school year. Generally speaking, intramural competitions do exist, but there is nothing that surpasses school clubs or individual classes that can unite the entire student body to work together towards one overarching goal. For a magic high school like this, unlike the Nine Schools Competition dominated by talented students during the preparation and competition phases, Course 2 students had many opportunities to shine during the Thesis Competition preparation phase, which was why the school campus approached a level of frenzy that could only be seen at a school festival.

The Year 1 female students from the Literature Club volunteered to be the compensatory team for the primary workers that were toiling away together at the last leg of the project. Although this was almost the end of the school day, the young girls were still occupied preparing the bentos for dinner. Mizuki, from the Arts Club, could also be seen among them.

As the saying goes, the sun sets earlier in fall, so right now in second half of October, night was descending earlier as well. Earlier, the western sky was still a dash of purple as if someone had splashed a layer of paint over the sky; now the faint purple had turned dark blue. The scene outside had taken on that of the night itself. "It is quite late", Mikihiko couldn't help but think at this time.

Today, he had been called in to serve as Club Activities Group Leader Juumonji Katsuto's training partner. Of course, it wasn't a one on one. This was a ten on one mock battle, with Mikihiko being one of the ten.

Even though he didn't feel there would be only one mock battle, Mikihiko wasn't holding too much hope in that regard. Unrelated to the Ten Master Clans and the identity as a Course 1 student, Katsuto's strength gave him a deep impression during the Nine Schools Competition. Even during the mock battle, the chance for him to challenge such a powerful opponent was not something one could simply ask for. This time, he had the valuable opportunity to experience exactly how strong Katsuto really was. Likewise, he brought an incredible desire to learn how to fight modern magic users into this mock battle.

As Mikihiko hoped, there were a total of 5 mock battles. He was also defeated by Katsuto 5 times. As he panted raggedly while falling to the ground (wasn't he supposed to be knocked down?), he was thoroughly satisfied with the use of his time. Since they started shortly after the half day classes on Saturday, by the time he was finished being Katsuto's training opponent it was already 4 in the afternoon. In order to prevent himself from shamefully vomiting during the training, he had only dined lightly during lunch, a point that his stomach was crying about right now. He squinted his eyes at the setting sun and thought "OK, let's go" as he stood up, only to suddenly hear the order "halt preparations".

Since Katsuto was serving as the supreme commander for all security personnel from the nine schools at the event, Sawaki was responsible for leading First High's security detail in Katsuto's place. He was also the one who gave that earlier signal. On reflex, Mikihiko stood up and was promptly cowed by Sawaki's force of personality (more like overwhelmed), and was promptly roped into combined training as a perpetrator. One hour later, though the security personnel continued training, the Year 1 students called in as opponents had been spared (The Year 2 students were not allowed to leave).

After exchanging the dirty training uniform for his school uniform, Mikihiko walked towards the second gym (known as the combat center) where the security team was training. On the surface, he was the one who provided assistance, but in reality Mikihiko was the one who took away more from the experience, which naturally warranted some thanks on his part. Since he didn't want to interrupt their current training, he was only planning on dropping a single greeting and then departing.

"Yoshida-kun, let me treat you to a meal as well!"

Mikihiko was once again following Sawaki only to find himself meeting with the leader for the compensatory team. What terrible timing, Mikihiko thought. Now, the only people left in the combat center were largely Year 2 students. There were some Year 1 students selected as part of the security detachment, but unfortunately, he just met most of them for the first time today. Actually, since he was famished right now, his timing should be perfect. However, eating with these people would turn the food to ashes in his mouth, Mikihiko thought.

Regardless, he should still decline, Mikihiko thought. Just as he was considering this, he felt an odd gaze filled with unease and hopeful relaxation fall upon him. Normally, "hopeful" and "unease" are opposite one another, but that earlier gaze plainly had a "relaxed" feeling. Quite concerned about that, Mikihiko couldn't help but follow that gaze. When their eyes met, a familiar (of course) girl's face leaped into his eyes.

At Mikihiko's surprise, Mizuki hurriedly turned her face and revealed a warm smile.

Thanks to Mizuki, now Mikihiko didn't have any way to escape — that was probably true no matter which excuse he spun — so Mikihiko could only sit in the outer circle of boys.

This appeared to be the last station for delivering meals. The young ladies from the compensatory squad sat primly with the sandwiches for the bentos on their lap (there were sandwiches and rice balls with meat for the boys). Probably pitying the hopeful stares from the bachelors in the security group, the evidence was that the female students were preoccupied with handing out towels and pouring tea before sitting down on the mats in the gym.

By the time Mikihiko took a seat, the compensatory squad was practically finished with their duties. The forcibly conscripted Mikihiko also sat on the mat, but his upbringing immediately prompted him to adjust his seating posture before accepting a bento box from the young lady sitting across from him. There was no need to identify this young woman because he had been following her from the corner of his eye whenever he had a chance.

"Thank you, Shibata-san."

An embarrassed look flooded Mizuki's face at Mikihiko's formal reply. While there were quite a few upperclassmen (mainly women) who secretly laughed at this scene, no one was rude enough to actually bother them. The students of the far famed First High were better than that. How would they be able to witness such a hilarious scene if someone openly mocked them?

—Mizuki and Mikihiko were unaware of the devious thoughts of those surrounding them. Neither of them had the spare time to do that. While she had plotted ahead of time to sit next to him, even though they were classmates, Mizuki didn't have the courage to initiate a conversation with a boy while surrounded by so many upperclassmen. On the other hand, Mikihiko's family had a lot of women studying their style (the Shinto System and Ancient Magic shared this distinction), so it wasn't like he was inept at carrying a conversation with a woman, but Mizuki's completely flushed and embarrassed expression caused him to be overly self-conscious and unable to broach any subject.

The end result was — in the eyes of their innocent observers, this was the bittersweet atmosphere of "first love". Not only were the young women using warm eyes to offer support, even the combat-orientated boys that had no connection with romance had noticed the peculiar atmosphere between Mikihiko and Mizuki. Whenever Mizuki poured tea for Mikihiko, her hands would frantically retreat whenever their fingertips occasionally touched. Whenever this sort of theatrics usually reserved for clandestine meetings on a bridge occurred, a flood of wordless killing intent and cheers would spring forth from their watchers.

Until now, the clueless duo had no idea that they were providing entertainment for dinner, but they were aware that "something seems to be off (really)?" The two of them possessed this degree of sensitivity and were getting slightly uncomfortable in the middle of the stares they had unknowingly engendered, especially Mizuki. Her fidgety appearance was becoming more and more obvious. Finally, she said something vague along the lines of "Ah, I, uh" and erratically stood up — rather, tried to stand.

Speaking of which, modern Japanese culture no longer called for kneeling on cushions. Sitting on chairs had already become the norm and the only people who still knelt were those engaged in martial arts, paired instruction, or religious practice. Essentially, they were all individuals engaged in special training. Nonetheless, society still held the stereotype that "women should kneel", so most of the young ladies in the compensatory squad were kneeling. Still, upperclassmen often secretly used Weight-Type Magic to lighten the load. Even Year 2 students in Course 2 knew how to use this sort of magic that didn't rely on speed without a CAD. Of course, the effect would only kick in ten to thirty seconds later, so whenever these ladies fell into brief lull of silence, they were secretly invoking Weight-Type Magic. The boys were all well aware of this point, so no one was going to start a conversation with one of the girls who suddenly fell quiet.

However, for Year 1 students and especially Mizuki, who was in Course 2, this was something beyond them at this point. Strictly speaking, she wasn't even aware that there was a trick to "reduce her weight using magic while kneeling". In addition, she never really practiced kneeling on a mat—

"Ah!?"

—So naturally, her feet went numb.

Seeing Mizuki wobbling on her feet and letting out a small shriek as she fell, Mikihiko immediately reached out a helping hand, but he still wasn't going to make it in time. He maintained a kneeling position and caught Mizuki's upper body. Since all his concentration was focused on not falling down together, Mikihiko never consciously noticed exactly where he was putting his hands.

After halting their momentum, Mikihiko let out a long sigh. It was then he noticed that he was facing the back of Mizuki's head. In other words, he was more or less in a posture that was hugging Mizuki from behind. He also noticed exactly what that firm, soft feeling was in his two hands......

Mikihiko's mental facilities ground to a dead halt. But his thought betrayed his intention, he recognized the true identity of what was grabbed by his hands. At this time, Mizuki's consciousness finally rebooted and accurately deciphered what her current situation was.

"———!?"

"S-S-Sorry!"

Mizuki let out a soundless scream of despair and started shaking. At this, Mikihiko frantically let go of both hands. Without any support, Mizuki's body started tilting forward as she fell forward, using her hands to support herself on the mat, placing all four limbs on the ground and her rear towards Mikihiko, a result that terrified Mizuki even more. As she stumbled to her feet, her numb feet caused her fall back on her rear once more. Owing to her sudden chain of surprising motions, her skirt had flipped upwards, revealing a significant proportion of her sock clad feet, shins, and even her thighs. This time, Mizuki used a blazing speed that normally wouldn't be attributed to her to swiftly restore herself to a kneeling position that "women were supposed to be" with her two hands tightly clasping the hem of her skirt. Her already flushed face was now completely burning red. Her eyes laced with tears, she strove back to her feet and didn't fall over this time before fleeing from the gym.

"What the heck are you staring for! Go after her, Yoshida-kun!"

Mikihiko was just standing there and staring blankly at Mizuki's back when he was roused by a nameless female upperclassman scolding him and hurriedly leaped to his feet. After running out of the building, he doubled back inside and grabbed his shoes from the rack. After grabbing a pair of slippers for Mizuki, who had fled without getting her shoes, he once again chased after the figure who had already disappeared out of sight.

Chapter 7

Even though today was Sunday, Tatsuya still had to go to school.

Not for remedial classes. There was still one week until the Thesis Competition, so of course he still had to make preparations.

But right now, he was headed in an entirely different direction than school on board his beloved electric motorcycle. His sister's pristine arms were wrapped tightly around his waist, her soft bosom was pressed against his back.

This wasn't a date.

Nor was it a simple trip.

Their destination was the FLT research labs. Heeding Yakumo's suggestion, they were going to return the relic specimen. He wasn't going to return it to the company, but 3rd Research Division that served as Taurus Silver's operational headquarters. While there weren't any plans yet to begin the analysis there, Sayuri had already expressed her consent when he got the specimen, so there wouldn't be a problem if the specimen was stolen from there. (Shouldn't be.)

They forewent public transit because they were worried about another attack.

At full speed, it would take roughly an hour to reach the research lab. Public transit took a longer detour, so it was far more expedient to take the motorcycle. For Tatsuya, who had rigorously trained his physical body, and Miyuki, who was capable of using inertial resistance magic, there was normally no need to take a break for a trip of this distance. However, shortly after leaving the city proper, Tatsuya pulled over the motorcycle next to a cafe that opened in the morning.

After urging the confused Miyuki indoors and taking a seat by the windows, Tatsuya finally answered his sister's questions after ordering two drinks (they already ate breakfast at home).

"We're being pursued."

Resting both elbows on the table, Tatsuya covered his mouth with his interlaced fingers and whispered to Miyuki.

"Eh!?"

Miyuki was barely able to suppress her volume.

"I didn't notice it at all...... Is it a car? Or a motorcycle like us?"

She leaned her head forward and whispered in her brother's ear.

The blushing waitress might have turned her head aside, but given her frequent, sly glances this way, she was only pretending not to see them. Of course, Miyuki wouldn't bother contemplating what the servers would think. (Speaking of which, she probably hadn't noticed her actions would easily lead to a misunderstanding.)

"It's a crow."

Tatsuya's concise answer prompted a "Ha?" from Miyuki as her eyes widened while she briefly turned the idea over in her head.

"......A familiar, is it......?"

"Yeah. And with a chemical congregation, too."

There were observation systems that were avian machines disguised as animals, devices buried within animals, using Ancient Magic on animals, or a chemical congregation in the shape of a bird.

Chemical congregations are objects that have materialized due to pushion energy.

The physical form was only for appearances' sake and was created by using psion particles as a foundation and applying life-refracting illusion magic to create the figure, then applying Weight, Speed, Move-Type Magics or a field with similar effects so as to give off the impression of a physical body.

On the surface, creating a chemical congregation seemed like a pointless exercise, but applying a few simple magics to the medium would allow the user to see and feel through the medium, making it a simple task to issue orders to the medium with a few simple changes. At the same time, creating one of them was a fairly simple process.

"......Doesn't appear to be a Magician from this country. Where did this Magician come from?"

Only Ancient Magic possessed the magic to create chemical congregations. The name "chemical congregation" was applied by modern magic researchers when they were researching Ancient Magic. What Miyuki meant was that it had been a long time since this country used chemical congregations as familiars. Today, most Ancient Magic users used familiars that didn't possess a physical body.

After the waitress brought the coffee and milk tea, Tatsuya spoke again.

Although he was wordlessly matching Miyuki's gaze while waiting for their drinks, this only deepened the misunderstanding. However, the two of them were either slow on the draw or just that thick since they didn't betray any reaction at the surrounding stares sent their way.

"Their identity remains unknown. If Mikihiko were here, he might be able to tell us."

Tatsuya set their cups aside and took hold of Miyuki's hand.

A ruckus broke out around them, causing the two of them to notice how conspicuous they were. Still, retracting their hands in embarrassment would only be admitting defeat, and there was a pressing need for them to hold hands. His sister wore an expression that conveyed her helplessness at the misunderstanding, while Tatsuya continued onward with a serious expression on his face — that only served to fuel the flames.

"It would be unwise to lead it all the way to the research labs."

"............"

"Miyuki?"

"Eh, ah, yes, you're right."

Tatsuya wanted to cover his head and sigh at the sight of his sister's wandering eyes and mystified expression, but managed to throttle that urge.

"The chemical congregation's location is here."

Tatsuya transformed the image of the chemical congregation as a target into psion signals and passed it across their joined hands into Miyuki's unconscious magic calculation area in her nervous system.

The moment magic is invoked, Magicians need to plug in the target's data into the magic calculation area. This data is every Magician's perception in digitized form and was something that generally couldn't be shared. Tatsuya and Miyuki were using magic unique to the Yotsuba Family and thus were able to transfer psion signals through physical contact.

"Miyuki, take it down."

A simple order.

At this time, Miyuki returned to a more serious expression.

"......Understood."

After a brief hesitation, Miyuki nodded.

Miyuki wasn't going to disobey Tatsuya's order.

The cause of her hesitation came from her understanding that magic sniping was her brother's area of expertise and that she was far less capable than her brother in this regard.

"Right now, I don't want to reveal my hand yet. The target will flee in the time I take to bring up the CAD. Miyuki, it's up to you."

"Yes!"

Excitement suffused Miyuki's face as there was no way she wouldn't give it her all once her brother asked it of her.

And so, with the fingers of her right hand interlaced with Tatsuya's left, she slightly dipped her head and lowered her eyelashes — her embarrassed posture was certainly ironic for these siblings. Beneath the table, her concealed left hand swiftly brought out a CAD and started operating it.

There was practically no delay for her magic invocation.

Tatsuya's "sight" beheld the familiar's body instantly freezing along with the magic that was sustaining that fake body, causing the chemical congregation of psion particles to scatter.

"Seemed like an amateur......"

"Eh? What?"

Miyuki piped up from the back seat after hearing Tatsuya's murmuring. Her posture hadn't changed from before, with both arms wrapped around her brother's waist and her chest and face pressed tightly against her brother's back.

She was still in an ebullient mood after flawlessly destroying the familiar in the cafe and her brother's subsequent praise, so even her voice was filled with joy.

In this situation, objectively speaking she was being careless, but no one would reprimand her here. Her conversation partner did not do so and merely answered her question.

"We only had one pursuer using long distance magic who attacked Sayuri first and then tried to follow us. In other words, their target is undoubtedly the Magatama. Of the suspicious crowd recently lurking around us, a portion of them must be here for the relic. But if that's the case, their determination wasn't enough."

"Wasn't it because Onii-sama's airtight defenses? There's a huge risk picking a bone with Onii-sama over a second-rate relic after all."

Miyuki's answers always automatically triggered her bro-con concerns, actions of reflex born of powerful thoughts and feelings.

(So, that's just risk and reward, is it......?)

However, within Miyuki's perfectly natural answer, Tatsuya felt that he had caught a glimpse of the true nature behind this sequence of events.

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They lost them. When Chen heard this report, he clenched his teeth as a bitter expression crossed his face. Originally, he was unhappy with such a passive stance like remote observation in areas he couldn't reach (where neither he nor his opponents could reach). On top of that, their opponents had realized this in 15 minutes and taken out their observer. This tragic turnout of events only deepened his displeasure.

(All this did was raise our opponent's hackles.)

Even if he tore them a new one, his incompetent minions would only shrink back even more, so Chen chose not to say anything. Yet, a burning fury was plainly spreading from his body.

"Do we know where Shiba Tatsuya is heading?"

"They should be heading for the FLT research labs of the R&D 3rd Division."

The subordinate who answered Chen's question was overly nervous. In order to avoid angering his superior, he had chosen the most limited answer that was least likely to rouse his wrath.

"ETA?"

"Approximately 40 minutes from now."

Looks like he couldn't just keep asking one question at a time.

"As soon as they arrive at the estimated time, order the network team to immediately attack the FLT research labs."

Without waiting for his subordinate's reply, Chen already gave out the next set of orders for the mission.

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This morning, the research lab inhabited by the individuals whom the workers at the FLT main branch derided as "Captain Taurus and his companions", the R&D 3rd Division, was consumed by chaos that was completely abnormal.

"—Hurry up and cut all the lines before wasting time worrying about it! Copy? Make as many as you can and that's it!"

"Number 10, disconnect complete. Commence reconnect!"

"Idiot! What kind of buffoon reconnects the system when being hacked!"

"OK, hacking path determined!"

"Tracing program commence!"

By the time he heard all the roars coming from inside the entrance, Tatsuya had a pretty decent grasp of the situation.

"Ah, it's the young master!"

After standing there for a minute, Tatsuya's outstanding assistant Ushiyama finally noticed the siblings. (In terms of how outstanding, Ushiyama was able to produce the hardware pieces that Tatsuya wanted for Flying-Type Magic as well as finish the "Mini Communicator" in half a day based on a rough blueprint and have it delivered to Tatsuya. He was that kind of a person.)

Anywhere else would be a different story, but this had to be the first time that Tatsuya had been left unannounced for at least ten seconds. In other words, the situation was very serious.

"My terrible apologies! I can't believe I ignored your arrival...... Hey! Who's the lazy bum who neglected to announce the young master's arrival!"

Ushiyama's angry roar was the loudest to date. It was a piercing sound wholly incompatible with his weak, frail appearance.

That voice caused over half of the workers battling it out with the terminals in the office to freeze in terror.

Seeing this, Tatsuya colored in displeasure.

"Don't stop! Keep an eye on the monitors!"

"Ah, yes!"

Tatsuya's order rivaled Ushiyama in intensity and immediately received a reply.

Seeing everyone once again enter a life or death struggle with their machines, Tatsuya relaxed and turned his gaze away only to find Ushiyama in a state of extreme anxiety.

"Hackers?"

He didn't know if Ushiyama's thoughts still dwelt on the electronics in front of him, but this was an unpleasant topic for Tatsuya and especially Ushiyama.

Tatsuya cut to the chase in order to avoid staying on this topic for too long.

"Ha, well......"

Despite the indecisive nature of Ushiyama's words, he wasn't upset in front of Tatsuya. While Tatsuya was still contemplating the comings and goings, Ushiyama started explaining.

"It's hackers for sure...... But it still feels strange. The infiltration technique itself is superb, but they don't appear to be looking for anything in particular. It's like they have no specific objective and are just roaming around based on luck."

"Individual interest?"

"Not the work of one person. Based on the MO, this isn't possible without a sizable team, even if our opponents were government organizations."

"Even then, they still don't have an objective, eh...... May I take a look at the stolen data?"

Tatsuya asked this question because since their enemy was running on blind luck, they might have stumbled onto something valuable.

"Well, they haven't taken anything yet."

Still, Ushiyama's answer was still within Tatsuya's expectations.

"......How long has it been since the hacking started?"

"Approximately ten minutes."

In other words, the moment Tatsuya and Miyuki arrived here. —Almost as if they predicted when they would arrive. By choosing to attack the servers at this particular time, Tatsuya felt the situation to be highly unusual.

"The infiltration attempt has stopped."

"Don't let down your guard! Everyone remain on full alert today! ......Ah, my apologies. So, what may I do for you today?"

Tatsuya briefly explained the chain of events regarding the relic, the company's contract, and his personal objectives. At the same time, in a separate area of his consciousness, he was chronicling the recent attempted thefts that were cropping up around him.

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"We're under attack from FLT servers."

"Disconnecting as planned."

According to Chen's orders, the hackers cut the line. Seeing this, Chen spoke to Lu Gonghu standing next to him.

"What do you think?"

"......Status unknown."

Lu's attitude was slightly inappropriate when addressing a superior officer, but Chen didn't hold it against him and continued to speak.

"After being hacked for over ten minutes without any interruption, Shiba Tatsuya would undoubtedly question the security of the labs."

Chen valued his second officer not for his decorum, but for his calm objectivity and overwhelming combat power. Verbosity was not necessary.

"Even if Shiba Tatsuya is related to FLT, he wouldn't easily hand over the relic to an insecure research lab."

"Logically, that would be the case."

"I know what you're saying. Shiba Tatsuya is a high school student. He wouldn't leave such a hot item on himself. In this situation, we must consider how to obtain the data from the lab."

Lu wordlessly expressed his agreement to Chen's words.

"We will probably need you to act."

"Leave it to me."

Chen nodded broadly at his second officer's answer. Suddenly, his face darkened as he seemed to recall something.

"Speaking of which, Zhou is about to see how that little girl is doing."

Chen's voice was not positive. It even contained an insulting impression, with many mixed emotions buried within. It was fairly easy to guess exactly how Chen viewed Zhou.

Still, Lu didn't object to his superior's tone and kept his eyes forward as he waited for the next order.

"Make the little girl disappear before he visits."

This was not the order Lu was expecting. Not only would this go poorly with Zhou, Chen would also lose a valuable collaborator.

Nonetheless, Lu Gonghu's expression did not question anything as he silently accepted this order.

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Even though today was Sunday, since they had to go to school, they couldn't just wear casual clothes either.

Some normal high schools (the general term applied to high schools of letters and science) did permit their students to wear casual clothes to school, but they were the decisive minority within normal high schools.

Magic high schools required uniforms regardless of whether class was in session.

The siblings dropped by the house for a change of clothes.

At this time, the personal line in the house rang. This was a call that could not be transferred. Restricting the message from being sent to portable terminals was to prevent other people from prying. The fact that this setting was activated indicated that the sender believed the contents to be highly confidential.

"Onii-sama, what is it?"

Miyuki, who took slightly longer to change, arrived to where Tatsuya was standing by the phone and discreetly glanced at the display.

"A message is it? From who...... Eh? Hirakawa-senpai!?"

Of course, Miyuki knew all about the attempted sabotage incident.

After hearing this, she did not bear a very sympathetic view of the Hirakawa siblings.

"Apparently she hopes we will return the call."

After perusing the contents of the message, Tatsuya hit the redial button before Miyuki could say anything.

The other side picked up the line after one ring.

"Hello, Shiba-kun? My apologies for asking you to call me back......"

Among the representatives for the Nine Schools Competition, Hirakawa Koharu was one of those who openly displayed a friendly welcome to Tatsuya from the get go. Still, they were only mere acquaintances. She was someone who disliked conflict and was typically courteous to anyone other than herself. In fact, she stood out for her timid nature that was completely different than Azusa.

Yet, from another perspective, timidness could also be seen as "gentleness" or "accommodating". Actually, it was highly possible more people believed that was the case.

"Hardly, we were the ones who were late. We just stepped out for a bit."

The hour right now would be quite tardy for normal classes.

It was hardly surprising that they weren't home during the weekend, but Koharu must have been waiting anxiously for Tatsuya to return her call. The fact that she picked up the phone after one ring was clear evidence of this.

The video transmission was now very common. Even though video cams had become practically universal, this was only a change in technology.

Human emotions had not progressed to the point where they were willing to allow their peaceful homes to be exposed before another's eyes, or let someone watch them change without hesitation.

There were households with dedicated phone rooms, but the overwhelming majority placed their phones in the living room and alerted the other side about opening the video cam.

Koharu's face did not appear on the display and the monitor remained black.

"Please don't worry about that, I was the one who requested to talk over the phone."

Still, it was apparent from her voice that she had lowered her head with a dark cloud over her face.

"These past few days, well...... My sister has caused you considerable trouble."

Nay, rather than saying a "dark cloud", perhaps her face was "utterly pale".

"It was only an attempt after all. As nothing happened, please do not worry too much. I don't mind either."

This wasn't just a line to help the other person relax, these were Tatsuya's true feelings.

"But, she still caused a lot of trouble...... Originally, it was already enough of a bother that Shiba-kun had to replace me. It is my ineptitude that caused this child to dig herself into such a deep hole. Causing you such difficulties during this critical period cannot be simply written off as a mere attempt. Although I can only apologize...... But I am really, really sorry."

On the other side of the unconnected video screen, Koharu undoubtedly bowed deeply in apology.

Her voice naturally gave off that impression.

However, Tatsuya's honest feelings were "Even if you apologize like this......"

He didn't wish for an apology, and hearing these depressing and self-demeaning words only served to sour his mood.

Honestly, he never took Chiaki's actions, or more like "what she wanted to do", to heart.

He never really even thought about it.

"I understand. On Hirakawa-senpai's behalf, we'll just write the whole thing off."

Hoping to quickly bring this call to an end, he halfheartedly comforted (?) her.

"Thank you very much. I hoped that Shiba-kun would say that."

She was impressive indeed if she could discern Tatsuya's real intent through those words. Looks like there was a serious misunderstanding.

"Hardly...... Then, goodbye."

"Ah, wait."

Tatsuya's attempt to hang up while Hirakawa was soothed appeared to be premature.

"What is it?"

There were many things demanding his attention. In other words, he simply didn't have time.

Tatsuya had to take extra care not to let his impatience bleed into his words.

"Well, I know a simple apology isn't sufficient."

Is it this again, Tatsuya thought. Tatsuya honestly wanted to give up on this endlessly looping conversation.

"I don't know if this can help Shiba-kun."

Fortunately, he was worrying needlessly.

"I found phone logs between Chiaki and the criminal organization. Although this contains that child's personal data...... But I still want to give it to Shiba-kun. Please use it as you see fit, Shiba-kun. Anyways, I'm sorry for bothering you while you're so busy. Thank you for listening to me for so long. Goodbye."

The call ended.

Without waiting for Tatsuya to reply.

"Even if they're siblings, hacking is a crime......"

Tatsuya murmured these words as if speaking to Koharu as he gazed at the data log icon in the adjacent frame.

"Onii-sama, what is it?"

She probably heard Tatsuya muttering to himself.

Miyuki approached again with a slightly concerned look on her face.

"So, what are we going to do."

After giving a subtle, vague answer, Tatsuya considered Koharu's intentions.

She was trying to use this to make amends. Although she didn't come out and say it, there was no other plausible explanation besides this one. Hirakawa hacked her sister's personal communications because she wanted to know who led her sister astray. Yet, her actions didn't paint her in a better light. Giving Tatsuya this information, she was hoping that he would avenge her, Tatsuya speculated.

(I wonder if this constitutes as cunning......)

The fact that he would use a term like a woman's cunning definitely pointed towards his insufficient life experiences.

"......Oh well. Allow me to make use of what I have."

Setting aside Miyuki with a completely perplexed look on her face, Tatsuya dialed another number.

Even with the data log that provided an abandoned access point in hand, he wasn't confident he could sniff out his quarry on the net.

But he knew someone who could.

The sky was raining when the two of them reached school. Although neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki brought an umbrella, fortunately they avoided being drenched.

Also, Miyuki was a member the Student Council who held the privilege of bringing CADs to school (though Tatsuya also held that distinction).

Wet clothes were swiftly dealt with by Miyuki's magic, leaving no trace behind.

However—

"Given the rain, looks like our field activity will be impossible......"

"There's nothing we can do about that."

Tatsuya shrugged his shoulders as Miyuki frowned at the dark clouds overhead.

So far, the preparations had been going according to schedule. Working indoors would be a little cramped, but then it's not like they wouldn't hit their deadline if they didn't do anything.

Personally speaking, he was originally going to do calibrations in the repair room for the Robotics Club, so weather really didn't bother him.

"Then, I'm off."

"Yes, please do your best, Onii-sama."

Miyuki still had Student Council business waiting for her as she regretfully bid farewell to Tatsuya.

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The Robotics Club was short for the "Robot Research Group". The repair room was a small lab where they conducted all sorts of robot construction and electric testing.

During the preparation period, there was a large computer here used for debugging purposes that helped to modify the Activation Sequence for the model device used during the Thesis Competition.

His assignment today was to calibrate the Activation Sequence. Since Suzune and Isori already finished the testing the mainframe's run time, Tatsuya was the only one with anything left to do today. The main focus of the demonstration, the thermonuclear reactor model, had already been connected to the computer. The Robotics Club members responsible for setting up the device had already left to help other teams put their components together. Right now, Tatsuya was the only person in the repair room.

(Am I a little late?)

Even though this was a day off with no classes, they certainly helped him a great bundle, Tatsuya chuckled wryly.

"Welcome back."

He was the only "human" in the repair room, but a second after he entered the room, a "humanoid" came to welcome him.

It was wearing a white apron with white frills above a black skirt that extended 10 centimeters below the knee. Beneath, there was a pair of white, knee high socks and black shoes. There was also a white headband with frills on the head.

(Seriously, so that's where their interests lie......)

"Year 1 Class E, Shiba Tatsuya."

Tatsuya chuckled and simply announced his name.

The welcoming "young lady" straightened and paused for half a second before bowing deeply.

The movements stopped to verify his voice.

Satisfied that the facial and vocal examination matched the records, Tatsuya finally bypassed the security features in this room.

"Preparing, coffee."

An awkward tone paired with an equally awkward movement.

Still, this "awkwardness" wasn't noticeable unless carefully observed.

Her name was "3H Type P94" (3H Personal-Type '94). The Robotics Club nicknamed her "Pixie".

This was the Humanoid Home Helper, also known as the 3H personal chore robot, owned by the Robotics Club. That was the identity of this "girl". Apparently, someone among the Year 3 students in the Robotics Club had connections with the HAR's primary distributors and were able to borrow an updated AI device.

Generally, the 3H's appearance was set to that of a woman in her twenties, but in order to reduce the incompatibility on campus, she was specifically set to be someone in her late teens.

Truly, if she wore the school uniform from First High and managed to sneak into class, she would be an exemplary "emotionless female student" if she could just sit down and not make a sound. She might even qualify for the term "cool beauty". —An effect completely lost when she was wearing a maid uniform.

Even Tatsuya was caught by surprise upon being served by a "maid robot" while preparing for the Thesis Competition in this room for the first time. Still, he was more or less accustomed to this garb now.

Just as Tatsuya sat down in front of the controls and faced the terminal, a cup of coffee was set on the table beside him with a small sound.

(Looks like there's still room for improvement in the control software......)

After pondering for a bit, he picked up the cup and took a sip. It was a fair cup, he nodded.

The newest 3H model "Pixie" possessed automatic, customized features that could identify the tastes of over fifty users based on facial structure. Even though Tatsuya didn't say anything, it was this function that enabled her to prepare a cup of coffee to suit him.

"Pixie, remain on standby."

After replacing the coffee on the table, Tatsuya gave this order to Pixie. Despite knowing she was a machine, having such a life-like robot standing behind him still felt unnatural.

"Understood."

The pronunciation for such a specific term was quite fluid.

The P94 bowed in a fluid motion that matched any live human and walked towards the seat near the entrance.

After taking a seat, she became motionless.

The power source for the 3H was a methanol fuel cell.

There was an option to refuel methanol — literally drinking it in this case, so the user didn't have to worry about exhausting the fuel.

However, there was no need to waste fuel needlessly, since the act of standing was rather taxing on the power (standing on both legs was a rather challenging exercise), so the model remained sitting when not in use.

Tatsuya moved his head around (no ulterior motive implied) and placed his fingertips on the keyboard.

The sound of lightly tapping the keys rang out.

Tatsuya's left hand left the keyboard and moved towards the pearl-colored display. This was the access point for users to directly interact with the large CAD plugged into the display. The user could supply psions needed by the Activation Sequence through this display, where the CAD would then read the Activation Sequence.

He was currently projecting the movements of the Magic Sequence.

Normally, the sequence involved breaking down the Magic Sequence into steps and removing individual steps before they came to fruition in order to test whether the desired result was brought about by the processes.

On the surface, he was following this procedure, but in reality he was using his "eye" to directly observe each aspect of the Magic Sequence.

His superlative talent in developing magic was largely thanks to this hidden ability (Elemental Sight), although other magic pioneers might label this as cheating — he was not the sort of person to quibble over things like that.

His physical eye was watching the screen while his mental eye was glued on the information dimension.

His work continued for roughly an hour.

Suddenly, he felt an uncomfortable feeling within his body.

Drowsiness suddenly sneaked up on him.

(Did I overdo it......)

Wishing to take a break outside, Tatsuya moved to get up, but—

His limbs were heavy.

Like his body hadn't woken up yet.

Highly trained individuals could use their will to control the physical body's desire for sleep.

Pulling several all-nighters in a row was another story, but he didn't recall that he led such an unprincipled lifestyle.

A danger signal flashed across his brain.

His physical body plainly was behaving abnormally.

[Physical functioning dropping abnormally]

Sleepiness itself is not something that poses an obstruction to combat ability.

However, when unable to awaken based on one's own consciousness, then this drowsiness became an impairment to combat ability.

[Personal Restoration: Semi-Automatic Activation]

His Personal Restoration ability recognized the necessity.

[Magic Sequence: Loaded]

[Core/Eidos Data: Retrieving from Backup]

Begin activation.

[Restoration: Commence...... Complete]

In an instant, his body returned to "a state before drowsiness came upon him".

But the primary problem still hadn't been addressed.

The only thing that he had consumed since leaving the house for the lab was the coffee from the cafe and the cup Pixie prepared for him. Neither of the two items contained hazardous materials. That was because he already used his "eye" to verify this before partaking in them. Thus, the only direction where chemicals could come from was—

(Gas!)

The circulation system must have been tampered with.

After taking a quick inventory of the information in the room, he confirmed that a fast-acting sleeping gas had been introduced into the air for a short period of time.

So what should he do now.

It was a simple matter for him to "decompose" the gas.

However, there were magic monitors all around the campus, so if he used "Decomposition" in a large, open space like this repair room to remove all the gas, the magic he kept hidden all this time would be revealed. That was not a desirable outcome.

Miyuki, Honoka, or Shizuku would be able to identify which gas particles were harmful and expel them from the room, but that sort of magic was a little too difficult for him.

At any rate, holding his breath also had its limitations.

Right now, the only thing he could do was leave. He could just leave the device behind without a problem. After locking the computer, Tatsuya turned towards the entrance.

Yet — before him, a slim figure halted him in his tracks.

The figure standing before Tatsuya stretched out a hand towards Tatsuya's mouth.

Since the movement wasn't particularly swift, Tatsuya wasn't clear what the figure was trying to do.

"Her" hand stopped shortly in front of Tatsuya's face.

"There is an abnormality in the circulation system. Please wear a mask."

3H (Humanoid Home Helper) Type P94, the feminine robot named Pixie offered him a simple mask.

At first glance, this appeared to be disposable cloth dust mask, but this was a high quality gel filter sufficient to block anything larger than carbon dioxide particles. Applied to the face, the filter was able to block almost all poisonous gases while not hampering breathing in any way.

They even have these, Tatsuya thought as he put on the mask and closed his eyes.

"Corneas in danger of contamination. Need to be directed outside, by hand."

Despite the clear need for linguistic improvement, Tatsuya got the meaning she was trying to convey perfectly. The newest 3H model P94 appeared to have crisis management protocols installed, or maybe this was simply the Robotics Club's "education".

Tatsuya knew that sleeping gas did not contain elements that harmed the eyes.

That was because she said so only after he closed his eyes.

Still, he made no motion to walk outside.

"Pixie, override and activate the ventilation system. To prevent secondary hazards, I will remain here. Remain in Monitoring Status. In order to allow assistance, do not prevent others from entering. You are forbidden from obstructing them."

The P94 accepted the chain of commands from Tatsuya.

"Avoidance of secondary hazards, logical and confirmed. Overriding ventilation system."

The air conditioning system and the ventilation system that was on a separate system had been activated.

The 3H itself was only a voice-machine interface for the automatic household system.

The small fuel cell that served as its power source and upright frame that stood on two legs were not suitable for physical labor.

Owing to its humanoid design, the number of sensors installed was also limited, so it wasn't suited for precision tasks either.

Based on the 3H's design, individual activity did not need to match the strength or precision of actual humans and was designed to facilitate the usage of the automatic household system.

After going through voice recognition, they were able to receive verbal orders. This was like remotely controlling the HAR that shared the same outward appearance as humans. The HAR was originally intended to be an add-on and never meant to cover all the bases for household management.

Still, the add-on functions were so well done that most people forgot the HAR's original purpose as an interface.

Not just everyone else. Even Tatsuya actually forgot today.

(Being overly accessible has its pros and cons......)

Tatsuya ruminated whether he had that embarrassing thought only because he refused to admit defeat as he waited for the sleeping gas to be expelled.

Taking the 3H's operations into account, the air conditioning system was being restored at the same time.

Tatsuya sat down in front of the terminal again and removed the gas mask. In order to refrain from scaring the person checking to see if he had fallen asleep, he closed his eyes and relaxed the tension in his body.

The person he was waiting for quickly arrived.

After the gas was removed, Tatsuya sat there with closed eyes, concentrated, and quickly detected someone creeping into the room.

He preemptively ordered the P94 to refrain from searching each individual before entering because he considered the possibility that someone would enter right now, which fell perfectly within Tatsuya's calculations.

"Shiba?"

The familiar voice of an upperclassman.

The statement was made to check if Tatsuya was actually asleep and would immediately offer a false offer of worry if he rose. However, based on the terrible alibi due to his awkward choice of timing to enter the room now, he was a complete amateur.

Naturally, Tatsuya continued to feign sleep.

"Shiba, are you asleep?"

Once again making sure that there was no answer, the invader glanced around as if looking for something, but his eyes quickly focused on the device. He abandoned the terminal as a target because he saw that Tatsuya already locked the computer. Or, maybe he never wanted the data in the first place.

The invader had no idea that Tatsuya was watching with narrowed eyes, nor was he aware that Pixie was sitting there in Monitoring Mode and recording the entire sequence. And so, the invader plugged the hacking tool he used on the recording cameras into the device and started trying to remove the Activation Sequence data.

"Sekimoto, what are you doing?"

The sudden query caused the invader to jump in fright and frantically whirl around.

(That's a wrap......)

Too bad the merry solo act ended so soon, Tatsuya thought to himself. Of course, the people in question, both the person being interrupted and the one providing the interruption — were entirely unaware of his terrible interest in entertainment.

"Chiyoda, why are you here?"

"Why? I came here because I received word from the security system that there was an error flag from the air conditioning system. Sekimoto, why are you here and what are you holding in your hand?"

"Impossible...... The alarm should have been disconnected......"

His panicky state, or maybe the presence of this unexpected surprise, caused Sekimoto to misspeak, prompting Kanon's eyes to go hard.

"Indeed. The alarm was sent manually and not automatically."

Pixie was the one who raised the alarm instead of Tatsuya.

The robot determined this was the proper action and followed through, which was another type of "automatic", but Kanon had no way of knowing. Compared to that—

"However, your earlier words can't simply be seen as words in the wind."

The most important thing was Sekimoto's accidental confession.

"What do you mean, the alarm should have been disconnected."

Criminals didn't always adopt logical paths of action. Still, there is a heightened degree of anxiety during the act itself, which was why they fell for traps that they would be able to avoid during normal circumstances. This was one of the key clues that enabled investigators to determine a suspect no matter how long ago the crime occurred. Currently, Sekimoto succumbed to the same cognitive trap that criminals often fell for.

"Sekimoto, remaining silent now is the same as admitting you did the deed."

Kanon's tone was fairly restrained, but she was clearly very sincere.

Kanon moved her left hand before her chest.

A running CAD was held in her hand.

It was already filled with psions to guarantee that the Activation Sequence would work.

This was not a contest, training session, or practical joke. This was a direct descendant of the Chiyoda Family from the Hundred Families preparing for live combat—

"Haha, Chiyoda, don't be ridiculous. I'm the criminal? Criminal for what?"

Sekimoto was trying to use false bravado to cover for himself, but this would only work when a large number of companions was with him and definitely not in a one-on-one confrontation.

"The criminal who tampered with the air conditioner by mixing in sleeping gas. In other words, the red-handed criminal engaged in industrial spying."

"How rude, Chiyoda! I was just making a backup because I was worried that we may lose data due to the system malfunction."

"Using hacking tools? That's frankly impossible. Isn't that right, Shiba-kun."

Sekimoto whirled around with shock to find Tatsuya smiling wryly with both eyes open.

Kanon had seen through Tatsuya's feigned sleep at a single glance.

"Impossible, the gas had no effect?"

"He's not a little cutie pie that can be undone by sleeping gas."

Tatsuya's wry smile deepened at Kanon's blatantly unfavorable tone.

"No way to deny that I'm not cute...... The rest is just as the Chief said. There is simply no way to directly prepare a backup for the device. Even if you tried, there would be no need."

The CAD plugged into the display device only recorded the Activation Sequence spreading out, and there was no way for an internal function to compile the Activation Sequence. Modification of Activation Sequences are often directly done on the computer, with a copy of contents included as well.

"Sekimoto, don't even try to think I'm that stupid. Even if my technical ability isn't all that great, I at least know that much."

Sekimoto clenched his teeth before Kanon's displeased glare.

He bore the appearance of a cornered rat that had been stripped of any excuse.

"Sekimoto Isao, remove your CAD and set it on the floor."

Kanon's tone changed.

She was now advising a criminal to surrender.

However, Sekimoto's response was,

"Chiyoda!"

The Activation Sequence spread out.

Sekimoto was a powerful member of the Public Moral Committee after joining in the second semester of Year 2.

There was no delay in his magic invocation, from reading the Activation Sequence to the construction of the Magic Sequence. His speed rivaled any representative from the Nine Schools Competition.

Yet—

"......Cut the bull, Sekimoto-kun!"

Sekimoto's magic dissipated. He realized an instant later that was because of Kanon's oscillatory-type magic using the floorboards as a medium.

When invoking magic, there was absolutely no need to recite the name of the magic used.

At the same time, calling out the name of the target was also meaningless.

Combat involving modern magic was decided in an instant.

Kanon had prepared her CAD first.

Even performing as pointless a gesture like calling out Kanon's name, there was simply no way for Sekimoto to seize the initiative from Kanon.

After Kanon called out, reinforcements from the Public Moral Committee and Club Activities Group burst into the room and Sekimoto was brought to the Student Guidance Center (aka "Interrogation Room").

During this time, Tatsuya never made a move.

Seeing Kanon's group leave, Tatsuya gave new orders to the waiting P94.

"Pixie, cancel Monitoring Mode, copy the visual and auditory recording starting from the moment the order was given into the memory cube and delete all files from the registry."

"Understood. Copying data files to memory cube...... Complete. ......Deleting records. Complete."

Pixie belonged to the Robotics Club, so Tatsuya didn't actually have that level of clearance. Still, since Tatsuya gave the order to make that recording, Tatsuya possessed the ownership power over the recorded files.

After placing the memory cube containing the evidence that even Kanon didn't know about into his shirt pocket, Tatsuya ordered the feminine robot to stand down again.

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Visiting hours for the hospital affiliated with the national magic university lasted from noon until 7 in the evening. Right now, the hour was just past 4, hence no one thought it was strange that a young man in a business suit with a bouquet of flowers in his hand would appear in the hospital halls. Also, there wasn't a sense of wrongness with a man holding a bouquet, since the youth was clearly from a well-to-do family.

Still, his unique features should have been particularly memorable, but none of the other visitors or nurses paid him any heed. That certainly constituted an amazing situation.

Maybe because he was a frequent visitor or for some other reason, the young man was quite familiar with the hospital layout and didn't even hesitate before heading up the floors without even consulting the display board. After taking the elevator to the fourth floor, the young man came to a halt in the corridors.

In front of him, there was the figure of a bulky man which sparked the young man's recollection. This man, who was slightly older than him but still rated as a young man, was standing before the door leading to a certain hospital room.

Zhou once remarked to the young man's superior officer, Chen, that he would be visiting today. At the time, Chen didn't object to his visit to the young lady, nor did he make any comment.

So this was Chen's plan, Zhou could only rationalize it as such. Thus, someone being here to prevent his visit and even hamper his business was the real reason why Chen didn't object to his activities.

Not even hesitating for a second, the young Zhou pressed the alarm on the wall as if nothing had happened.

As the young man headed to the fourth floor from the third floor, a young couple came from the In Patient Wing. The man's name was Chiba Naotsugu and the woman was Watanabe Mari. The former was the second son of the Chiba Family bearing the proud title the Genius Swordsman while the latter was the former Public Moral Committee Chief from the magic university affiliated First High. The two of them were in the middle of a date.

"Nao."

In the eyes of her underclassmen, Mari was the heroic and valiant older sister, but before her lover she was a perfectly feminine, gentle young lady. Still, not only was this because she naturally wore an embarrassed expression while with her lover, there were a few apologetic traces in her expression as well.

"Well...... I'm sorry that I asked you to accompany me while you're so busy."

Mari's intent was to interrogate Hirakawa Chiaki under the pretext of visiting her at the hospital. At the end of the day, this was First High's issue, which was precisely the reason why Mari was "apologetic" to Naotsugu.

However, hearing Mari's words, Naotsugu wore a "Who do you take me for?" expression and lowered his head to look at Mari.

"What are you saying that for, I don't mind at all."

"But, don't you have to make preparations to ship out tomorrow?"

"While it is a naval exercise, this is primarily for the helmsmen and gunners. Our mission involves overseas training. There is some manual labor, but I'm already used to that."

Hearing Naotsugu's joking words, Mari's brows relaxed somewhat.

"Is it combined amphibious training at Guam?"

"Ah, yes. Our mission is slightly different than last time, this time it'll be a short training session lasting approximately 10 days. The burden isn't too heavy, so Mari, you don't have to worry about it so much."

Naotsugu smiled slightly after he answered Mari's question.

"......Is something still bothering you?"

Naotsugu saw a color of hesitation still remained in the smile Mari returned, thus he asked.

"......But, Erika."

Mari's tone was slightly hesitant because she wasn't sure whether to bring this up.

"Erika?"

On the other hand, Naotsugu's voice was filled with a "completely unexpected" bewilderment.

"......Nao was gone for a long time last time, and don't you usually train with Erika at home? Is it OK to ask you out today?"

At Mari's comment, a gloomy expression mixed with traces of anger floated across Naotsugu's face.

"Erika is currently training with one of her classmates as a sparring opponent. Apparently he's quite the interesting fellow, and Erika seems quite happy."

"Classmate? He?"

Mari's slightly concerned question brought about quite a strong answer.

"Hm, just a friend, I believe."

"..........."

Mari didn't say anything. She just stared blankly at Naotsugu's face.

Somewhat uneasy, Naotsugu pretended to cough.

"Nao?"

"Don't worry about Erika right now. The important thing is that I want to be with Mari. So Mari, you really don't have to worry so much."

"D-Don't say such e-embarrassing things!"

The offensive and defensive roles quickly reversed. The one who usually retorted at others was often susceptible to the same tactics. Mari, who had relentlessly tried to throw Tatsuya off balance by joking him up until she resigned as Chair of the Public Moral Committee, was sunk by one earnest comment from Naotsugu.

Naotsugu was finally able to breathe a sigh a relief at disarming his lover's suspicions, but his relaxed nerves quickly tightened with anxiety.

That was because the alarm rang out.

"Nao!"

Mari's expression tightened despite how she was wavering a moment ago and looked towards Naotsugu.

"That's no fire alarm, that's the riot alarm!"

The riot alarm was designed to prevent innocent bystanders from being dragged into criminal incidents, but also served as a signal that called for assistance in restoring order.

"It's on the fourth floor!"

Naotsugu looked at the monitor on the wall that displayed the alarm details.

"The fourth floor?"

"Is it the same floor that Mari's kouhai is in?"

Mari's solemn expression immediately conveyed to Naotsugu the severity of the situation.

"Let's go!"

Nodding her head, Mari didn't hesitate for a second after an incident broke out. In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that she was the one pulling Naotsugu up the stairs.

In the midst of the alarm, Lu Gonghu put his hands on the door handle leading to the sick room. He had already investigated the details of the room that his target was residing in. There was only one young girl inside. Lu Gonghu was confident that he could get rid of her before security showed up.

However, a shocked expression made its way across his face when he tried to pull the door handle only to find that the door was locked. According to his general knowledge, doors were usually opened during a fire alarm to help facilitate evacuation. Was there a malfunction in the lock? Lu considered this because he was unaware of the riot alarm.

There was a small time lag due to the cultural shock. Originally, Lu planned to destroy the lock and enter the room. Yet because of the alarm, he mistakenly believed that the lock would automatically disengage, hence his bewilderment when he found the door still locked. Although Lu immediately changed his mind and opted to destroy the lock, this sort of unexpected time loss was critical in his mission.

Just as he was about to twist the door handle open,

"Who are you!?"

Across from Lu's position, someone called out to him.

Thanks to the Chiba Family's special techniques, Naotsugu used personal acceleration magic to sprint to the fourth floor and ran across a young man several years older than himself trying to break the door lock.

On reflex, he called out "Who are you!?", but just as he vocalized this, his memory had already supplied the answer.

This man surrounded by a terrifying aura that raised every hair on one's back—

"The Devouring Tiger...... Lu Gonghu! Why are you here?!"

As a member of the Chiba Family who were the authorities in close-combat magic, Naotsugu was well aware of this man's name and facial features. He was one of the top ten close combat specialists across the globe and was a close-combat Magician who hailed from the Great Asian Alliance. Due to the similarity in age, the debate regarding which one was stronger between him and Naotsugu continued to rage, but the majority believed that the more brutal one — Lu Gonghu with his terrifying "name" that caused people to cower in fear, was stronger than Naotsugu.

"Ghost of the Phantom Blade - Chiba Naotsugu."

Facing this direction, a small sound passed across Lu Gonghu's lips. "Ghost of the Phantom Blade" was undoubtedly Naotsugu's original nickname.

The moment their eyes caught one another, a battle for supremacy began.

Naotsugu pulled out a 20 cm baton from his chest pocket. After pressing a button near one end, a 15 cm long blade slid out with a "clang".

On the other side, Lu Gonghu only had his bare hands, but he fearlessly charged towards where Naotsugu stood with the short sword in his hand.

When their distance shrank to the length of a long sword, Naotsugu's right hand scythed downwards.

The short sword was still out of range, but Lu Gonghu still raised his left hand over his head.

When the invisible line extending from the short sword intersected with the left hand, a furious "clang" rang out.

Weight-Type Magic "Pressure Slash". This was a magic that used the metal coil that extended from the tip of the rod to form a thin repulsion field that sliced through anything it touched.

This was why Naotsugu was waving around a short sword out of the weapon's range.

If Naotsugu's technique rated as astounding, then Lu Gonghu's ability to block an enemy blade with his bare hands was even more incredible.

Steel Qigong, so named by the users from Northern China that favored this technique, was developed from Qigong. Qigong was a physical ability rather than a magical one, but using Qigong to apply a layer of steel armor eventually became the magic now known as Steel Qigong. Lu Gonghu was the man responsible for bringing that to fruition.

After the repulsion field blade was blocked by the barrier surrounding the body, Naotsugu's right hand continued to swing downwards. Once the magic was nullified, Pressure Slash became just an empty swing of the short sword, but Naotsugu managed to turn the downward swing into an upward slash when the blade reached waist height.

In order to defend against the attack, Lu Gonghu applied Steel Qigong on his right hand and blocked towards the right side of his hip. However, his right hand didn't encounter any resistance as the repulsion field blade disappeared half way.

It wasn't anything particularly special to halt an invoked magic before the spell reaches completion. In conflicts between magic combatants, in comparison to rejecting interference strength, using replicated magic on the Eidos to render previous magic impotent was absolutely integral to cooperative use of magic.

However, the difficulty was entirely different when suddenly applying another spell when invoking the previous one. If the Eidos is not altered in the beginning and just the Magic Sequence is utilized, once the Magic Sequence passes the gate — the connecting gate between the human mental landscape and the information dimension that resides between the lowest layer of consciousness and the top layer of subconsciousness — the Magic Sequence would dissipate into nothing. There would be no way to misdirect one's opponent without any traces of magic invocation. In order to consciously halt magic in the middle, one needed to actually project a Magic Sequence the same way magic is invoked, then canceling the invocation before it finishes. Thus, switching consciousness and focus in an instant was absolutely integral.

Lu's body was already ready to receive the incoming slash, but because the repulsion field blade suddenly disappeared he was off balance as his body tilted towards the right. Naotsugu seized this opportunity to once again deploy "Pressure Slash". The invisible blade slashed down towards the right side of Lu's neck.

Another "clang" sound went off, but there was no blood. At the last second, Lu used the Metal Bridge technique to drastically lean backwards and take this opportunity to twist his body to meet Naotsugu's blow. Using his falling back as a fulcrum, he whirled and sent a flying kick at Naotsugu. Naotsugu was forced to leap back and Lu Gonghu took this opportunity to reset his balance.

There was no way their contest could start over from the beginning. During that exchange, it was obvious that Naotsugu could have clinched the advantage if he was able to take advantage of the timing. Naturally, Lu Gonghu wasn't foolish enough to let his opponent dictate the pacing. After righting himself, he reached out with his right wrist and took large steps forward.

Naotsugu swung his short sword at Lu's outstretched right wrist, but the 15 cm long blade was rejected by the spiraling forces swirling around the wrist. This was also a move from traditional Chinese martial arts, a magic technique that used the entire nervous system to create a spiraling force at the point of impact that served as both offense and defense called "Coiled Silk Force".

Naotsugu's body shook like a leaf caught in the river current after he sustained the force from the coiled nerves. In order to avoid Lu's advance, Naotsugu was forced to leap backwards.

Naotsugu's massive retreat caused Lu's furiously advancing fingertips to miss their mark. However, Lu didn't give Naotsugu any opportunity to reset his posture. Fist, palm, bear claw, the blows came flying forward intermixed with attacks with the elbow, shoulder, and even a tackle as a furious tide of attacks pressed Naotsugu relentlessly and completely denied him any opportunity to use Pressure Slash. Naotsugu was forced to retreat each time, but even so, none of Lu's attacks managed to land on Naotsugu's body. Although there was no trace of any emotion save for fighting intent on Lu's face, internally he was starting to fret a little. He raised his attack speed, but at the same time, the offensive output of each of his blows shrank.

Finally, Naotsugu's back was against a wall and he had nowhere left to run. Lu's fists swung forward like a windmill. However, his right haymaker was blocked by Naotsugu's right hand in the form of a karate chop. The short sword that was originally held in Naotsugu's right hand had vanished. For the first time, turmoil warred across Lu's face.

After nullifying the attack from Lu's right hand, Naotsugu managed to divert Lu's attack strength. Off balance, Lu's body tilted forward. Meanwhile, the short sword originally in Naotsugu's right hand materialized in his left hand.

Naotsugu's sword wasn't aimed at Lu's exposed back of the head, but slashed towards the side of his waist. Tilting forward, Lu's body was perfectly in line to receive the blade coming for his abdomen. Even at this disadvantage, Lu still tried his utmost to twist and avoid the blade going into his vitals. The short sword swept across Lu's side and left a deep cut.

Inverted, Lu sent his feet kicking towards Naotsugu's head. Naotsugu took one step back to avoid the blow. Following that Lu's body flipped sideways instead of forward and his feet were pressed against the wall rather than the floor. In the next instant, he kicked off the wall and pounced ferociously towards Naotsugu.

The pair of outstretched hands were like the claws of a tiger, its strength in no way inferior to a feral beast and capable of shredding flesh and bone alike.

An overpowering sense of danger prompted Naotsugu to flee in spite of his terrible posture. Lu kept his leaping posture as he brushed past Naotsugu and landed two meters away. Landing with both hands on the ground, he quickly turned around and pounced on Naotsugu again. Despite Lu Gonghu's injury, the ferocity and pressure of his attack seemed to be even stronger than prior to his injury. This time, it was Naotsugu's turn to fret.

After the fourth charge, Lu Gonghu's attack was interrupted by an attack from the flank. On reflex, he took evasive action.

Two burning blades came rushing towards Lu. Its true form was tightly compressed air caused by high temperature differences. Lu saw the opening between the two blades and dodged between them. Yet immediately afterward, the concentrated compressed air exploded in fury, striking Lu's body from both sides with their combined explosion.

Lu grunted in pain and sprang towards the stairs at one end of the corridor. Naotsugu hurried in pursuit, but Lu's figure had disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"Mari...... Thanks for the assistance."

It was Mari's magic that enabled Naotsugu to escape from harm, but this was not a premeditated attack. After seeing Naotsugu locked in combat with Lu, Mari immediately joined in the attack. The reason why Mari finally interposed in the conflict was because until now, the battle between Naotsugu and Lu was too intense and close to risk launching her attack.

"Nao...... You're hurt......!?"

Although Naotsugu's words were meant to comfort Mari as she came rushing forward — plainly, Mari didn't even hear him — because her astonishment suffused her face. Before her eyes, Natosugu's right hand was flushed into an angry red.

The outcome of Naotsugu and Lu's battle could be deciphered from the pain each side suffered. When deflecting Lu's attack, Naotsugu's right hand also suffered considerable damage. Flank versus right hand, from a long term perspective Naotsugu had the upper hand, but if the battle was to be decided quickly, then Naotsugu would undoubtedly fall after losing his primary hand.

"Don't worry, although I need to see a specialized doctor in the beginning, I can handle the rest. Fortunately, we're currently in a hospital."

"But you ship out tomorrow......"

"That's OK. My superiors would understand. After all, this is a work related injury."

Naotsugu's tone was no different than normal, which allowed Mari to gradually relax. However, after shaking off her turmoil, her brain sprouted another question.

"That man...... Who was he? To be able to match Nao in close quarters."

Naotsugu hesitated briefly, but still answered the question.

"That guy is called Lu Gonghu. A Magician from the Great Asian Alliance's Special Ops."

"Lu Gonghu...... So that's him......"

Mari was long aware of Lu Gonghu's name that was just as famous as Naotsugu's own.

"Mari."

Naotsugu suddenly grabbed Mari's shoulders and turned her to face himself.

"Nao, why are you doing this all of a sudden?"

Shame faced, Mari turned aside.

"Mari."

Nevertheless, after hearing Naotsugu call out her name again in a decisively odd tone, Mari turned back around.

"I must leave tomorrow. During this time, I am very worried since I won't be by your side......"

"I understand, Nao. Then, is there anything you need to tell me?"

"Lu Gonghu saw your face before disappearing. He will definitely see you as an enemy."

Mari nodded at Naotsugu's words. Her eyes didn't contain a hint of fear, which only deepened Naotsugu's concern.

"That man is a barbaric Magician bearing the name "Devouring Tiger". You saw his power today. During this time, please don't be by yourself."

Mari's felt that Naotsugu's words were an exaggeration, but she swallowed those words at the serious glint in Naotsugu's eyes.

Lu Gonghu, who had been forced to retreat from his duel with Naotsugu at Mari's interference, was currently sitting in the passenger seat of the luxury car that Zhou was driving.

"My apologies if I stole your thunder there."

After leaving the gates of the hospital, Zhou struck up a conversation from the driver's seat.

Lu said nothing as he kept his eyes forward.

Zhou kept going despite seeing that Lu's attitude wasn't very welcoming.

"Speaking of which, I am quite surprised that Master Lu was injured."

Even though he was aware that the topic at hand was discussing his own mishap, Lu didn't bat an eyelid.

"Did you use Earth Mover?"

The question he opened his mouth to ask was regarding the ability Zhou used to facilitate his escape.

"Surely you jest. Compared to Master Chen, my level is merely cheap parlor tricks and definitely unworthy of any notice."

And so, Zhou smiled without a care as he responded to Lu's accusation that he was hiding something up his sleeve.

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After returning home from school, Tatsuya immediately walked towards the conference phone.

The first number he dialed was one he called earlier today.

"Hello."

The voice came from a young woman (not a young girl) and used words that seemed two centuries out of date.

Not only the image, but even the volume quality had been boosted, but he could tell that the slightly murky image came from the phone on a mobile terminal.

"It's Shiba."

"Aya, it's quite rare for you to call twice in one day."

A clear, frank voice accompanied the image of a smiling woman wearing a suit like a young secretary from a large corporation that was displayed on the monitor.

She intentionally disguised herself inconspicuously, but her mundane cosmetics and ordinary wardrobe only served to intensify her moving features.

"My apologies, are you in the middle of a date?"

"Haha."

Fujibayashi, wearing clothes that perfectly suited that sort of nightly encounters, let out a professional, dazzling smile.

"Alas, this is work. Besides, the Casanovas are only welcome at this time. Since there aren't any good men around, oh wells."

Her tone was quite different than usual, which implied that she drank something containing alcohol. Of course, Tatsuya (on the other side) was never going to be caught dead saying something moronic like "you're in the middle of drinking".

Even though cars were now controlled by the central control system in the city proper, drinking and driving was still a punishable crime. To be precise, sitting in the driver's seat after imbibing constituted a crime. Social norms dictated that one must be able to maintain accurate judgment and normal mobility while operating a motor vehicle.

On the other hand, Fujibayashi's work wouldn't involve a normal car. As usual, she would be driving her modified car with boosted intelligence gathering functions. So, she was on her own car and was drunk. In other words, someone else besides Fujibayashi was currently in the driver's seat.

"Ah~...... I wonder where there's another handsome man like Tatsuya-kun."

Maybe she realized that Tatsuya was thinking about pointless things, Fujibayashi started flirting with Tatsuya in a sultry tone. Even after she spoke, she mischievously sent amorous gazes at Tatsuya.

"Is that so. I actually had a few things I wanted to talk about, so I guess I'll call back tomorrow."

Tatsuya only said this because he was absolutely certain that Fujibayashi was joking around with him. On the other side of the screen, Fujibayashi's coquettish expression was exchanged with an elated smile.

"How calm of you...... Well, that makes you worthy of the title 'man with most free time'."

"Somehow I feel that calling me the one with the most free time seems a little overboard...... By the way,"

"Relax, I'm alone right now."

Fujibayashi cut off Tatsuya before he could signify that he was concerned about information security.

"So, you can say anything you want."

Then, she urged Tatsuya to cut to the chase.

"Thank you."

Even Tatsuya, who was a proponent of sticking to his own guns, would be pulled along at another's pace if his opponent was Fujibayashi.

Tatsuya waved the white flag at someone who seemed to be able to switch between expressions like an actress before cutting to the heart of the matter.

"Actually, there was a burglary on campus today."

"Burglary? You mean the incident you mentioned this morning? They actually went through with it?"

"Yes, and they used sleeping gas as well."

On the other side of the screen, Fujibayashi wore an astounded expression that said "So they actually dared".

"Fortunately, it ended in an attempt."

"Sorry, I know we've restricted your side on our end......"

"This result isn't entirely because of my duty to the military."

Fujibayashi bowed her head in apology because Tatsuya was restricted to certain magics because of classified military secrets, so Fujibayashi was apologizing because Tatsuya had to unnecessarily go the extra mile.

Even if Fujibayashi's words were true and Tatsuya's words were only an excuse, repeating them was necessary to grease the wheels of this conversation.

Neither the apologizing side nor the receiving side truly meant what they said.

"I have a video recording at the scene of the attempted robbery."

"Eh...... How did you manage that?"

When planning to steal information, cutting the video feeds was the basic of the basics. Also, there was no way he could be just sitting in that room waiting for the crime to occur.

"It was recorded by an independently running robot."

"Oh, the 3H, so you have that kind of interests."

"Negative, the location is the room belonging to the Robot Research Club and the 3H was an accessory within."

Since the 3H boasted refined features, some people believed that individuals who utilized the 3H had a certain sort of fetish.

Knowing this, Tatsuya tried to use "independently running robot" to muddle through, but it looked like that didn't work on Fujibayashi.

"That recording,"

There was no way Tatsuya could clear his name if it got stuck here, so he forcibly moved the conversation forward.

"I managed to save it, so can you investigate?"

"What did you get?"

Honestly answering at this point was likely one of positive sides of Fujiybayashi's personality.

Although this degree of interaction was normal, there was still an equivalent rating system. At any rate, in Tatsuya's social circle, this was already a "pleasant personality".

"The tool used during the attempted robbery includes the logo for the CAD containing the hacking processes."

"I see. Tatsuya-kun, looks like you've got the fox by the tail."

"That would be an exaggeration, but that would be the gist of it."

"No worries."

At Tatsuya's expressionless face, Fujibayashi intentionally replied with a robust voice. Truly a pleasant personality, indeed.

"The captain said it's about time to get started, so we've already been keeping tabs on logos. We should be able to narrow it down in the next day or two, so just sit tight and wait for the good news."

Mysteriously, Fujibayashi made this prediction.

Nothing more needed to be said after Tatsuya thanked her. Afterwards, he passed the data to Fujibayashi's terminal.

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After finishing the call with Tatsuya, Fujibayashi let Inspector Chiba Toshikazu and his sergeant back onto the car. —Although she did drink wine, Fujibayashi was still sitting in the driver's seat, which more or less coincided with Tatsuya's estimation. Anyway, Fujibayashi was one of the individuals in the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion that fell outside the norm.

Still, from Toshikazu's perspective, this movement was filled with an interesting aura. In order to continue the case where the trail had gone cold, he wanted to purchase information from the intelligence vendor who knew everything across the world, "the owner of Rotbart".

This was why he was acting in concert with the beautiful young woman he ran across in the Cafe Rotbart.

He originally wanted to borrow her strength, but now it looked like he was doing volunteer work. Even though he privately asked himself "How did it get to this?", he still hadn't arrived at a satisfactory answer. Earlier, he had believed that he was immune to her womanly charms, but upon repeated reflection, he was no longer so confident in himself.

"My apologies, Mr. Chiba, that was a private call."

"No, that's quite alright."

Toshikazu was wearing a high-class casual suit that matched Fujibayashi very well, though the fact that policemen still received a paltry pay from past to present was a headache for many people. However, from his perspective, he received an extra stipend from his family in addition to his policeman's wage, so his wallet was considerably more corpulent.

"So, what clues did your private informer give you?"

In order to avoid breaking the relaxed atmosphere, Toshikazu stepped lightly into the issue. In response, Fujibayashi's face lighted up with a delighted smile the same way she smiled at Tatsuya earlier.

Emphatic men were always welcome. Fujibayashi was highly irritated by slow-witted opponents, so she appeared to think highly of Toshikazu's quick wit.

"A poor mouse that was used by the fox, as well as the picture of the tail lent to the mouse."

"......So it's a recording of the collaborator and the hacking tool?"

At Inspector Chiba's somewhat bewildered guess, Fujibayashi smiled and said "Correct" as she nodded.

"Inspector, do you know the first step to hunting foxes?"

Afterward, she watched the man in the passenger's seat with serious eyes.

"I don't know...... Unfortunately, although I carry a gun...... I've never been a hunter."

Unable to keep up with the swift change in topic, the young inspector was unable to fluidly answer the question. The smile that masked his identity as an elite lieutenant fell away as he murmured with a solemn expression.

"Hunting foxes starts with finding the foxhole. Once the den has been destroyed, the hounds can be let loose to shoo the fox from the bushes."

"......So we should look for the den?"

"I'll leave the recording of the high school collaborator to you. Start by investigating this person's movements through the street cameras. If there was hardware that cannot be obtained normally, then it would mean that the student must have made contact somewhere."

Investigating the camera recordings without a warrant was unquestionably illegal. In addition, since the target was an adolescent, a search warrant wouldn't be granted easily. Still, Toshikazu had another question in mind.

"Compared to location, how long will we have to look? It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are nearly unlimited locations for one person to visit within a short one to two months. Trying to find a suspicious contact within this time frame is......"

"There are 32 locations within Tokyo proper. Among these locations, pick out the locations where the collaborator has visited in the past month."

Fujibayashi's answer nearly forced Toshikazu's mouth to drop open in shock.

"......Thirty two locations...... You've already narrowed it down so much."

"That's because the inspector isn't aware of data for other collaborators. While you're still thinking "Wow, now I'm going to be busy" and are at your wit's end, we got our hands on additional information."

"......Other collaborators? Why wasn't the police informed?"

"Naturally, that's because the other collaborator is a girl."

Toshikazu was struck speechless at this concise answer.

"I cannot leave a girl with her future ahead of her on the police's blacklist."

"......So it's OK if it's a boy?"

"That's their own responsibility."

Toshikazu had no words for Fujibayashi's declaration.

"I believe in a patriarchal ideology, so I believe that men are supposed to work harder than women. Thus, men must learn to discipline themselves and take responsibility for their own actions."

At Fujibayashi suddenly using these archaic principles to stuff the conversation, Toshikazu could only continue to stare at her for a long time.

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It was already the second day when the wounded tiger returned to its lair after being wounded against the foxes. (Of course, they believed themselves to be the hunter.)

Seeing Lu's injury, surprise flooded Chen's face, but he didn't ask how the man suffered his injuries. He had already made his report on the mission. Before returning, Lu proposed another surprise attack, but Chen rejected that approach. Lu was supposed to be responsible for the failed assassination attempt on Hirakawa Chiaki, but Chen chose not to do so. The cause of the failure and especially Zhou's activities during this time weighed heavily on Chen's mind. They might fall into Zhou's snare if he prosecuted Lu's responsibility now. In addition......

"The situation has changed!"

Another emergency had occurred. In order to handle this situation, Lu's strength was imperative.

"Our allied collaborator, Sekimoto Isao's mission in First High has ended in failure. He has been arrested and is now being held in the Hachiōji Special Detention Center."

Forget the hospital, there was no way to breach a special detention facility designed to hold (or protect) magical adolescents without serious firepower. Additionally, Sekimoto had personally made contact with Chen and company, so he naturally stood at a higher priority than Chiaki, who only met through Zhou.

"Set aside Hirakawa Chiaki's mission for now. Concentrate on eliminating Sekimoto first."

"Yes, sir."

Although the mission difficulty had spiked several levels, Lu still blandly accepted his orders. It was impossible to tell from his expression that he had been injured.

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Monday.

While waiting for Miyuki to descend from the bus, Tatsuya found a pair of classmates sitting together in the back.

They must have felt his gaze. The man and woman sitting next to one another both formed an "Ah" with their mouths.

"Onii-sama, did you find something interesting?"

Gracefully descending from the bus, Miyuki asked when she noticed her brother's expression. Upon following the direction of her brother's gaze, she covered her mouth with one hand with an "Ah!".

Before the siblings' gaze and across the windows for two rows of seats, Erika and Leo stiffly smiled back in welcome.

Today, there were four companions going to school together from the station. Although it was rare that all eight of them were together, it was equally infrequent for four people to be together.

The reason for this was obvious.

"......Hey, why are you guys so early today."

Leo asked in displeasure.

However, although Leo appeared to be venting his ire, Tatsuya wasn't someone who walked on egg shells in fear of others.

"Since there's only one week left until the competition, there are all sorts of arrangements starting from the morning."

Right now, they were an hour earlier than usual.

"Leo too, why are you here so early?"

Tatsuya had a legitimate reason in next Sunday's Thesis Competition. Objectively speaking, it was more perplexing for Leo to show up at this time than Tatsuya.

"Erika seemed to have gotten up really early today too?"

Tatsuya wanted to continue asking Leo, who seemed to be at a loss for words, but Miyuki beat him to the punch and asked Erika instead.

"......I usually get up really early."

Erika's answer seemed a little guilty as she replied back to Miyuki's innocent, refreshing smile with her pace noticeably picking up towards school.

"Is that so? So that's why Saijou-kun got up so early today."

Still, hearing Miyuki murmuring to herself, Erika finally stopped in her tracks. There was no way she would be able to stand aside and let a comment like that pass by.

"Hold on, Miyuki! If you say it like that, doesn't that sound like I get up every morning to wake this guy up?"

"Yeah! Seriously, I should be the one who got up earlier!"

Yet, Erika's counterattack was horribly derailed by Leo.

"..........."

"..........."

"..........."

Erika, Tatsuya, and Miyuki wordlessly glared at Leo. (To be precise, only Erika was glaring, the other two wore innocent expressions)

"......Eh? What's with this mood?"

Leo was the only one who could not comprehend the situation (that he caused).

"......Why isn't anyone saying anything?"

Although Erika's tone remained biting, her face was completely flushed and tears appeared in her eyes.

"Oh well...... The early bird gets the worm."

Tatsuya was no scoundrel, so there was no need to continue asking at this stage.

In truth, Tatsuya wasn't very capable at changing the conversation.

By his side, Miyuki's bewildered smile and Leo's confused tilt of the head were, on some level, a perfect comparison.

Tatsuya arrived at the classroom just before class to find Mizuki frantically trying to comfort the sulking Erika in the room.

"Ah, Tatsuya."

The one who struck up a conversation was Mikihiko.

As usual, Leo sat with his back to him and a scowl on his face.

Mizuki must have stepped on a landmine, with Mikihiko pouring oil on the fire.

Tatsuya immediately grasped the situation.

"Erika, it's about time to let it go."

Tatsuya said as he brought up the soft drink can and lightly tapped Erika's face.

"Ah!?"

Erika jumped out of her seat in surprise.

"What are you doing?"

"Catch."

Tatsuya put the can of cola into the hands of Erika, who was 50% more aggressive than usual.

"Hot."

Erika said this in an odd tone like someone catching a hot potato while directing a confused look at Tatsuya.

"Drink something sweet to change the mood."

"......Hmph, don't think you can get back into my good graces with this."

Erika said this as she popped the cap, though her face had relaxed somewhat. Tatsuya's smile reached her eyes.

"......What?"

Upon seeing Tatsuya's expression, Erika was forced to ask. Still, though there was still some resentment, her overall tone had softened.

"You borrowed the Chiba Family's power to train Leo and teach him new magic, right? I didn't intend to tease you guys, so relax."

These words were originally intended to soothe Erika, but they brought an entirely unexpected result. Pure astonishment suffused Erika's face.

"......Is Tatsuya-kun really clairvoyant?"

"No, I am not clairvoyant. I speculated that was the case after gauging Leo's energy consumption and, in conjunction, the fluidity of his magic."

The magic that Tatsuya spoke of was something that combined psion fluidity and phenomenon rewriting in order to invoke magic.

Fluidity of psions impacted Magic Sequence construction speed, precision, and scale. Yet, just this alone was unable to affect the Eidos. All of these had to be combined with the power to rewrite phenomena in order to constitute magic.

"No, energy this and magic that, you said it so naturally...... No, at this point."

Magicians were adept at perceiving psions and judging interference strength. However, Erika was getting tired of being constantly surprised by the depth of Tatsuya's knowledge. —Speaking of getting tired, Erika definitely wasn't the only one.

"Now that you mention it, Tatsuya, how bad was it yesterday?"

Seeing the storm pass, Mikihiko spoke with a much more relaxed expression on his face.

"Yesterday? Ah...... The news spread quite quickly."

Tatsuya paused for a moment not because he was playing dumb.

Regardless of whether it was Hirakawa Chiaki or Sekimoto Isao, he had handled both incidents yesterday, so it was hard to use "how bad" to describe them.

Given that Fujibayashi said "one or two days", the hackers would be captured today or tomorrow. This was as good as a fact for Tatsuya.

The Electron Sorceress — "Electric Witch".

Fujibayashi Kyouko's two titles not only signified her talent in electronic interference magic as a Magician, but also her ability to see information gathering on the Net as child's play.

Compared to manipulating the phenomena of the world, she was more adept at altering information on the network.

Just as Tatsuya could read the information that was written into an item in the past, so too could Fujibayashi Kyouko retrieve and reconstruct information that had been copied over from magnetic and optic memory units. And, unlike Tatsuya, she had no time restriction. In place of that, she had a limit where she couldn't retrieve the data if it had been physically deleted, but in an age where computers had linked the entire globe, completely eradicating data that had been recorded was practically impossible.

In other words, for her, so long as any trace of the electronic signal remained, she would be able to find it no matter where it hid.

Fujibayashi was the one who taught Tatsuya how to work the network, but in this field he had no chance of catching her in this lifetime. In Tatsuya's estimation, there were only a handful of network specialists who could rival her ability.

"Ah, the perpetrator has already been arrested, so there's nothing to worry about."

Hence Tatsuya answered Mikihiko in this manner.

Still, Erika and Mikihiko were unable to relax because they remained in the dark regarding Fujibayashi's movements.

"Just because we caught the perpetrator red-handed doesn't mean we're in the clear."

Erika said.

"This doesn't sound like a solo act, maybe there's some sort of organization behind this......"

Mikihiko also had similar concerns.

"How about we go interrogate him?"

Then, Leo abandoned his role of quietly listening to everyone and interjected with his normal overly optimistic tone.

It wasn't that simple. Setting Chiaki aside, Sekimoto was in the special detention facility. Nonetheless, this time Leo's comment didn't invite the usual retorts and backlash.

"You're right...... We should seriously pursue the individual's responsibility."

Even Erika, the one who usually retorted the most, expressed her complete assent.

"Really? But Erika-chan, Sekimoto-senpai is currently at......"

"He's probably held at the special detention facility. We can't just simply walk in there and meet him."

Mizuki's hesitant words were quickly supplemented by Erika's own. Of course, she wasn't going to change her mind simply because Mizuki was against it.

"It's not that we're completely out of ideas. Barring further options, we could just sneak in."

"Hey~ Hey~."

Hearing this, Tatsuya finally couldn't hold back any longer.

"Even if we don't do that, we can see him so long as we have a permission slip from the school. Currently, Sekimoto-senpai is still a student at First High."

Accidents were unavoidable during the course of magic training. Every year, several magic high school students would withdraw from school owing to accidents in training that led to the complete loss of magic. In a similar vein, so long as the perpetrator did not commit a heinous crime, expulsion was not a punishment granted often. While the crime Sekimoto committed was malicious in nature, it still remained at the attempted phase. Thus, Sekimoto's punishment was dependent on how repentant he was. Parole officers keep members of society with unique skills in the special detention centers to evaluate their progress, but students are still able to visit them.

"Eh~."

There was no way Erika was ignorant of this.

"That permission slip rests in the hands of the Public Moral Committee, I believe."

It was because Erika didn't want to use the legal methods that she proposed an alternate method that smacked of criminal activity.

"Regardless of how you put it, it's easier than trying to sneak into the detention facility."

However, Tatsuya frankly vetoed Erika's proposal.

Thus, after school in the Public Moral Committee HQ.

"No."

Kanon simply and clearly rejected the proposal to visit Sekimoto.

"......Can you give a reason?"

Since Kanon's reply was too concise, Tatsuya wasn't even sure where to begin.

"No is no."

Kanon stubbornly stuck with the word "No". Maybe this was her being emotional, but she appeared to be afraid that if they got into a debate she would be persuaded in the end.

"What I want to know is, why not? The permission slips for visiting the detention center are evaluated by the Chair of the Public Moral Committee or Student Council President, but the ultimate decision rests with the school. There's hardly any persuasive strength in just handing down a unilateral no."

Hearing Tatsuya's reply, Kanon furrowed her brows, a clear sign of her irritation. Her chilly attitude until this moment was blatant enough to cause people to wonder "if something had ticked her off" or some other ulterior reason. Yet, she couldn't just simply back down before Tatsuya, so Kanon's strategy seemed doomed from the onset.

"......Because this is going to be very troublesome."

Seeing no possible way to continue, Kanon reluctantly replied.

"Based on what...... First, what would be troublesome?"

Of course, this excuse wouldn't fly with Tatsuya. It was only natural that he would ask Kanon.

"Can you guarantee that nothing will happen with you guys just running around!?"

For some reason, Kanon's reply was a shrill question of its own.

"Seeing as you guys are all ignorant, allow me to put it bluntly! Shiba-kun, this sort of trouble always appears in your surroundings, yet you are either unaware or believe that you are blameless, but trouble still finds you on its own. With how busy we are right now, please stop creating trouble for everyone right now!"

Despite the stretch in logic, Kanon's words bore an indomitable force.
—Also, Tatsuya was aware that Kanon's words weren't entirely wrong.

"Kanon, saying that about Tatsuya is going too far."

At this time, Mari, who had rarely popped into HQ due to her hectic schedule, arrived to break up the dispute.

"At any rate, Tatsuya-kun is still involved with the issue at hand. It stands to reason that he would want to understand the comings and goings."

"But, Mari-senpai."

"Well, OK, Kanon, it's not like I don't understand what you're driving at."

Do you really understand? Tatsuya thought. Nonetheless, since Mari was helping him out, he wasn't going to actually complain.

"Fortunately, Mayumi and I planned to visit Sekimoto tomorrow, so we can have him accompany us."

"Well...... If it's with Mari-senpai."

Looks like Kanon isn't someone that is overly stubborn as she reluctantly agreed with Mari's proposal.

"Is that OK, Tatsuya-kun? Coming along with your senpais, that is."

Truth be told, he wasn't satisfied completely, but seeing as this was Kanon more or less backing down, Tatsuya expressed his agreement in the end.

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In a room with no windows, Chiaki sighed.

Honestly, she was quite bored.

Despite her status as an invalid, she wasn't injured. No, though she did suffer injury, it wasn't to the extent that warranted a stay in the hospital.

Within the extent of her own feelings, she didn't feel that she was injured to the point that required bed rest.

She was stuck in this sickroom not because she was injured or ill, but for other reasons.

For her, this was like a luxurious prison.

Of course, she knew that her presence here was entirely her fault, hence she didn't complain about her loss of freedom. But this was simply too boring. Naturally, she wasn't demanding television, wireless terminals, models or other luxury items, even unconnected cheap e-books would do. Even if entertainment was out of the question, even physical activity would do. Anyway, she couldn't just sit here doing nothing.

Earlier, about two hours ago, the nurse who checked in on her said "visiting hours are canceled today". Supposedly, this was because someone attempted to break in yesterday. Likewise, it wasn't the fire alarm but the riot alarm linked to the police that rang out yesterday, so it must have happened.

Regardless, it wasn't like anyone was going to visit her — her older sister must hate her because of this — so canceling visiting hours didn't affect her much, so there was no need to worry. In reality, Chiaki surmised that the target of the "break-in" was herself because the door to this sickroom had been damaged. Obviously, she wasn't asleep during that time, so she knew this even if she didn't like it. In Chiaki's eyes, "those guys" were trying to silence her. However, there was nothing she could do about that and Chiaki had already given up. She was only their collaborator and not one of their companions. Since Chiaki understood this, the other side must think so too. It was perfectly understandable that they would silence her in order to prevent a leak.

In truth, her mood had already reached a "do as you will" phase. Right now, she wasn't even sure why she bore such intense enmity towards "that guy". Maybe rotting away in this empty, white sickroom was the best ending for her, Chiaki ridiculed herself.

At this time, someone knocked on the door. In spite of Chiaki's muddled state, she still had a grasp of her mental facilities. The afternoon check up was already over and she hadn't pressed the button for a nurse. There shouldn't be anyone coming to see her, and didn't the nurse say today's visiting hours were canceled?

The knocking continued despite her amazement, so Chiaki frantically — without thinking much — pressed the remote door control.

"How are you feeling? Miss Hirakawa?"

The one who came in was thoroughly unexpected — but she had a premonition, if someone was to come see her, it definitely would be this person.

"Mr. Zhou."

Once, Chiaki was unable to keep watching her sister wallow away in pain and despair, thus forcing her to flee onto the streets one night. At that time, it was this person who comforted her with kind and gentle words. The person who told her that they shouldn't have suffered like this and reinforced her dark thoughts. The person who prodded her to vengeance, not through murder, but to right a wrong. The person who allowed her to vent those pent up feelings. The person who gave her the tools of her vengeance.

The savior who saved Chiaki's fragile heart stood before her with a bouquet of flowers in hand.

"Why...... did you come? Visiting hours are canceled today......"

Gifts were no longer necessary, as there were a mountain of things she needed to apologize for. Chiaki utterly loathed how she was bound by these tedious emotions. Especially after saying those words, she wished she could slap herself.

"I used a few tricks."

Saying this, Zhou winked in a childish fashion, but his action wasn't particularly irritating.

"Tricks...... As in magic?"

"No, no, it's a little different than magic."

Based on her own understanding, Chiaki interpreted trick to mean magic.

Yet, Zhou shook his head at Chiaki's question.

"Even without magic, humans are still able to pull off a few miracles. Well, calling it a miracle is a bit of a stretch."

Zhou smiled once more and Chiaki finally managed to recover her wits (according to her).

"Then, Mr. Zhou, I...... You helped me so much, but I couldn't do anything."

Before Chiaki could get started with her apology, Zhou dropped the bouquet before her.

For some reason, the bouquet was filled with a mesmerizing beauty that managed to capture her attention with its brilliant luster.

"All of that is unimportant."

Zhou's voice seemed to come from far away.

Chiaki stared blankly at the bouquet and lent her ears to Zhou's words.

"If you feel regret."

Chiaki's eyes were glazed.

"If you feel the burden is too heavy."

Her consciousness was entirely dominated by Zhou's voice.

"Then just forget about me."

"Forget......?"

Chiaki involuntarily spoke these words; she wasn't even aware what she was saying.

"Yes, just forget about me."

"Forget...... Is it OK to forget......?"

Under Zhou's guidance, Chiaki allowed herself to forget.

"Yes, all you have to do is forget."

"Understood...... I will forget......"

Chiaki gave herself the order to forget.

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October 25th, the Tuesday after school. Tatsuya, Mari, and Mayumi went to the Hachiōji Special Detention Center where Sekimoto was held. There were only five days until the Thesis Competition, so this was really the busiest last leg of the preparation phase, but since Tatsuya's tasks were proceeding smoothly, he was able to spare two or three hours away from preparations.

In reality, Erika, Leo, and Mikihiko also wanted to tag along, but that was a little inconvenient for the upperclassmen. Mari only had reservations regarding Erika alone, but it was a little too challenging for innocent high school boys to associate with unfamiliar female upperclassmen. —Actually, the permission slip that Tatsuya handed in only had three spots anyway. Speaking of which, Miyuki was completely tied down with Student Council business, so she could only send the three of them off with an unsmiling "beautiful smile".

While there were all sorts of procedures at the door, there wasn't any hassle beyond the door. After handing them a LPS terminal as a guide, there wasn't even a staff member to accompany them, which was most likely the result of Mayumi leaning on the "Saegusa" name. Of course, Tatsuya wasn't certain of the veracity of that, nor did he wish to comprehend the reason behind their special treatment.

The room Sekimoto was held in wasn't a "cell" and there wasn't anything like metal windows or something like that. It was actually more like a second-class room in a hotel. Even then, there was a hidden room that could observe the contents of that room.

Mayumi and Tatsuya both entered the hidden room. Mari would be the only one to face off against Sekimoto. Although Mari was the one who proposed this arrangement, neither Mayumi nor Tatsuya voiced any disagreement. Tatsuya knew very well that even if Sekimoto proved to be violent, Mayumi was confident she could control him from the other room, although Sekimoto's talent was but a tiny fraction of Mari's own.

From the hidden room, they saw Sekimoto without any restrictive shackles. Of course, he was forbidden from leaving the room. Sitting obediently on the side of the bed, he was wearing simple clothes not out of place during a hospital check up. He probably had undergone a thorough full body search, so the chances he carried hidden weapons or a CAD was absolutely zero.

Under Tatsuya and Mayumi's watchful gaze in the other room, the door leading to that room opened. Needless to say, this was Mari. Sekimoto, nonplussed at the opening door, revealed his astonishment at this. However, in the next instant, his eyes were wary and suspicious. Sekimoto detected a hint of danger when Mari appeared by herself.

"Watanabe...... Why are you here?"

Subconsciously, Sekimoto rubbed at his left wrist from his seat on the bed, probably involuntarily looking for his confiscated CAD. Although his voice did not waver, it was filled with a nameless dread.

"Obviously, I'm here to understand the situation."

Likely due to his service as a Public Moral Committee member, Sekimoto knew what Mari was capable of. He must be downright terrified of Mari's ruthlessness.

"So...... Even you can't use magic here."

Sekimoto's accusation was correct. This was the place to detain adolescent Magicians who broke the law. Though there were no automatic anti-magic devices like "Cast Jamming" installed here, there were still devices that could detect magic invocation. Once magic usage was confirmed, disarming gas would be released along with rubber bullets from machine guns, followed by security bursting in wearing full protective gear.

"Is that so?"

—On the condition that the surveillance system was working properly.

Sekimoto finally comprehended the reason why Mari couldn't help but smile.

"We don't have much time. Just tell me the important details."

Seeing Mari's teasing grin (in Sekimoto's eyes), Sekimoto frantically stopped breathing. —But it was already too late, halting his breathing was insufficient to avoid magic.

Sekimoto's consciousness suddenly dipped into the fog. He wasn't even aware that he had succumbed to Mari's attack before starting to answer Mari's question.

"Is she using scents to control his mind?"

Tatsuya was perfectly clear on what Mari did after watching from the hidden room.

She was using various scents to directly provoke emotions and memory. This theory had already been medically proven in the previous century. Commercial aromatherapy relied on the powerful effects on emotions caused by smells.

Using the ventilation system, Mari sent perfume wafting through the nose into the olfactory cells, hereby combining a scent that lowered mental resistance and another which controlled the consciousness to create a literal truth serum.

"Tatsuya-kun, is this the first time you've seen this?"

Mayumi was not surprised that Tatsuya could see through Mari's technique. Taking Tatsuya's diverse knowledge in magic, Mayumi felt that this was perfectly natural. She was likely more amazed that he had served in the Public Moral Committee for half a year and had never witnessed Mari used this technique.

"This is truly the first time. Wouldn't blatantly using this sort of magic land her in a heap of trouble?"

Mayumi nodded at Tatsuya's words. "Just as you say." Magic usage has been heavily restricted by the law, not to mention this sort of brainwashing ability. If used recklessly surely this would come under fire from "collective reasoning" and "civic duty".

Despite his ongoing conversation with Mayumi, Tatsuya never lost sight of Sekimoto's "confession" for a second. What aroused his interest was Sekimoto confessing that "after obtaining the data from the presentation device, he planned to investigate Shiba's private possessions". When Mari asked for why, Sekimoto answered with "the Magatama relic".

"......Tatsuya-kun, do you have something like that?"

Mayumi asked him with wide eyes.

"No, I do not have such a thing."

While Mayumi's question hinted at all sorts of underlying questions, honestly answering the question would only create more problems for Tatsuya.

"But......"

"Probably because recently I was researching things related to the "Philosopher's Stone". Maybe this is where he got mixed up?"

Mayumi also knew that he did use this excuse a few days before the election for the Student Council President, hence she didn't pursue the issue. Still, this wasn't because she entirely believed Tatsuya's words, but more because this wasn't the right time to do so.

Just as Tatsuya was let off from this easily debunked lie, the alarm sounded for the Hachiōji Special Detention Facility rang out.

The reactions from all three of them upon hearing the alarm were incredibly swift. After pressing the still befuddled Sekimoto down onto the bed (not to let him rest), Mari charged out of the room. At the same time, Tatsuya and Mayumi also exited from their chamber.

"Looks like we have illegal intruders."

Mari's voice trembled slightly in surprise. Thanks to the assault on the hospital affiliated with the magic university yesterday, the police in western Tokyo were on high alert. Although the mobile defense force (National Guard) that were the highest form of security hadn't been mobilized, the number of patrols today had increased by fifty percent. Likewise, this Hachiōji Special Detention Center was also twice as alert as usual. Only someone who truly had some skills or was a complete moron would charge in now. —Mari's gut leaned towards the former.

"Tatsuya-kun, do you know where they are coming in from?"

Hearing Mayumi's question, Tatsuya removed the LPS terminal and fiddled with it. The flip open display showed a 3D map for the evacuation route. They could estimate the intruder's point of entry based on the route.

"They seem to have come in through the roof. They might have used a flier or a spring loaded mechanism. Currently they are near the east wing of the third floor."

At Tatsuya's words, Mayumi's gaze drifted towards an unknown location. She had activated her Sensory Systematic Magic "Multi Scope" to its largest extent and looked in the direction Tatsuya indicated.

"......Found them. Nice work, Tatsuya-kun. There are four intruders, each armed with high power assault rifles."

High power rifles were mandatory weapons against Magicians. The explosiveness and flying speed of their rounds were three to four times higher than normal rifles and could even penetrate defensive magic. The surplus in strength could only be produced by highly skillful manufacturing. There was no way the average gangster or terrorist could get their hands on one.

"Security is setting up a defense line near the platform of the stairs using the terrain."

"The entrance to the corridor has been blocked by blast doors."

As Mayumi was reporting the current situation, Tatsuya pulled up the 3D projection for the building map. The three of them were on the first floor in the central building. Although there was no cause for alarm based on the current situation......

"Their target is here."

Half a beat after Tatsuya twisted his head to look towards the upper levels, Mari also watched the entrance warily.

"What? Ah!"

Mayumi had no idea what put the two of them on guard, but in the next instant.

Directly before their eyes, the figure of a large man appeared. He was taller than Tatsuya by a head and approached nearly 185 cm. His muscular physique didn't betray a hint of sluggishness, like a large carnivore advancing forward. Still, the man appeared to be using some sort of technique, since his aura and appearance were both faint. Despite his appearance before them, he seemed to disappear if they stopped paying attention, so he must have arrived here using some sort of invisibility spell. Of course, Mari had a deep impression of this man.

"Lu Gonghu!"

Mayumi didn't seem to comprehend Mari's soft whisper, so her facial expression didn't change much. On the other hand, Tatsuya kept a grim visage on his face. Although he had heard of this individual, after Mari calling out his name, this was the first time he had met the man face to face. —Of course, he was well aware of the man's reputation.

Advancing forward, Lu's eyes stopped on Tatsuya and company. Specifically, his eyes rested on Mari.

"I believe we should be beating a retreat at this time, but looks like it's too late for that."

Tatsuya said in a light tone as he stepped in front of the other two.

As he prepared to walk towards Lu, Mari grabbed his shoulders.

"I'll take him on. Tatsuya, you protect Mayumi."

From Tatsuya's perspective, this was a ridiculous arrangement. True, Mari boasted first class magic combat ability as a Year 3 magic high school student. However, Lu Gonghu's close combat magic level was "beyond first class". She had no chance of victory in a head to head confrontation. Their chances of victory were definitely higher if a "regular" like himself took the field.

"Mari, be careful."

Unexpectedly, Mayumi voiced her support for Mari's tactical assessment. Still, this wasn't the time to continue this conversation, so Tatsuya obeyed.

"I know he's no small fry."

Mari stretched her left hand slightly forward and, as if to pat her dress, swatted downwards before raising her hand again. With a sound, the normally straight pleat dress made from ultra thin fabric was massively raised, revealing a pair of tights that outlined delicious curves along with the leather holder along one thigh. A 20 cm long rod was removed from this leather holder.

The hem of her dress fell back down to obscure Mari's pair of mesmerizing legs. Maybe he had been caught up by the sight, but Lu didn't fall into a combat stance until Mari raised her left hand.

Lu Gonghu tilted his upper body forward with both hands dangling in front of him. His fingers were slightly curved, giving his body the impression that it was ready to pounce at any given moment.

Yet, the first to act here was neither Mari nor Lu Gonghu, but Mayumi standing off to one side.

The instant mist seemed to cover the walls to the left and right and the ceiling, countless white pellets swarmed towards Lu Gonghu. Lu Gonghu pounced forward, but over half of the ice pellets still struck his body.

However, Lu was not harmed by this barrage. His entire body was covered by Steel Qigong and managed to repel the incoming ice pellets. His momentum didn't decrease in the slightest as he charged towards Mari. Mari raised her 20 cm blade to meet him.

A dull metallic sound rang out as Mari stopped Lu's outstretched right arm. Afterwards, Lu's head massively tilted backwards as a 20 cm edged leaflet sheared by his face. The weapons in Mari's hand included a 20 cm long handle, two 20 cm long short blades, and another small short blade attached to a string.

At this time, Mayumi's second attack descended. Lu leaped backwards to a safe distance. His instincts were correct. The floor and neighboring wall where he just stood were peppered with numerous pellet marks. Mayumi's second attack was harder and even more precise than the first one, with superior speed and penetrating power.

For the first time, a human expression came across Lu's face, an expression called mystification. He knew that he wasn't at full power due to the injury in his side. Still, that a few students, and female high school students at that, were able to hold him off rather begged disbelief. Nonetheless, Lu's bewilderment only lasted a second. He canceled the magic that suppressed his aura and focused entirely on the battle at hand.

Lu erected several layers of psion information bodies around his entire body. Tatsuya could see that both his layers of information bodies and physical barrier magic were of the same nature. Earlier, his entire skin was covered by a high density of psions, which was the same as fortifying the Eidos of the skin. However, now he switched over to barrier magic. After Mayumi released her third shot, this attack was blocked by Lu's physical barrier. Afterwards, he closed in on Mari with lightning speed, to which Mari raised her dual-edged blades to counter, but it didn't seem likely that she could hold him with that pair of blades against the strength of that barrier magic.

At the point of impact with Mari, Lu's figure disappeared.

Mari frantically pivoted to the right, an action that was entirely based on her instinct, but fortunately this was the right choice.

Unfortunately, she wasn't going to make it in time.

Lu Gonghu had passed by Mari's short sword and got behind her.

Mari mentally called out "Mayumi!", but there was no time for her to actually verbalize this.

Just as Lu came face to face with Tatsuya, who was standing directly in front of Mayumi — a storm of psions devoured him.

Gram Demolition.

Seeing that Lu Gonghu had transferred his Data Fortification magic to a physical barrier, Tatsuya used a continuous stream of compressed psion particles to shred Lu's armor.

Lu's eyes were filled with shock.

Now, Mayumi's shooting magic activated once more.

Lu's reaction sustained his high reputation as "beyond first class".

He swiftly recovered from the shock that came from the destruction of his barrier Steel Qigong, and immediately erected Steel Qigong for Data Fortification. However, while Mayumi lowered the number of shots, she had raised the strength of each shot accordingly. Now, Lu Gonghu's hastily erected Steel Qigong was no longer able to completely deflect Mayumi's shooting magic.

Taking hits from the pellets, Lu was forced to halt his footsteps due to the impact from the large number of psions disrupting his senses. Now, even Mari was closing in from behind.

The twin blades in her left hand released a small short blade that flew towards Lu's head.

Mari's right hand suddenly hurtled some sort of black dust towards Lu Gonghu.

Lu immediately covered his eyes and ears.

The black dust seemed to cover his head and quickly dissipated after emitting a faint light.

Lu's large frame started to rock back and forth. Under the effect of Mari's Absorption-Type Magic, the rapidly "burning" carbon particles were restricted from interacting with heat and light, but quickly interacted with oxygen. The result was that much of the oxygen was converted into carbon dioxide. In a flash, the air became thin around Lu Gonghu's position.

Mari wielded the thin string in her left hand like a weapon. Along the direction of the swing, the string emitted the repulsion edge "Pressure Slash". Also, there was more than one. The twin blades falling upon the head also emitted "Pressure Slash" along the edges of the blades. The thin string in Mari's hand had exceeded the speed of her twin blades thanks to the application of Gravity-Type acceleration magic. Even Tatsuya wouldn't be able to dodge all three attacks at the same time, and the "Devouring Tiger" Lu Gonghu was no exception. Although Lu managed to evade the repulsion blade in Mari's hand, the other two struck him in the shoulder and back. Even with Steel Qigong sustaining him, he was in a state of oxygen deprivation after sustaining Mayumi's magic shooting, and the barrier wasn't operating at full strength. Thus, the two blades landed direct hits to his body. Although he was able to avoid major bone fractures, the blades still sank into his flesh, leaving two long cuts. Under the impact of Mari's direct attacks, Lu keeled over.

Cavalry was a role that always arrived late to the party. Only in movies do they appear in the nick of time.

Thus, reinforcements from security only arrived after Lu had been subdued. The four security officers beheld the scene where a young man was knocked down by twin blades and revealed astonished expressions, but upon closer examination of the uniforms the three students wore, they quickly bound Lu Gonghu tightly. Chances were high that these people knew of Mayumi as well.

Running counter to Tatsuya's estimation, they were not questioned by the authorities. Again, this might have been caused by the power coming from the name "Saegusa", though Tatsuya wasn't going to complain. He was already incredibly thankful that he didn't have to waste any more time, a thought that Mayumi and Mari must also share. By the time the three of them were conversing, they had already left the premises.

After leaving through the front door of the detention center, Mari somewhat hesitantly approached Tatsuya.

"Tatsuya-kun, uh, although you may know now, but please don't speak of what you just saw."

Naturally, Tatsuya had no way of making heads or tails of what she meant with just those words.

"In regards to not speaking of this, are you referring to senpai's weapon? Or the fact that senpai can wield 'Dojigiri'?"

Tatsuya asked this to verify the conversation topic, but when Mayumi and Mari heard his question, they both sighed in unison.

"So you really do know about it......"

"Tatsuya-kun, so you are omniscient after all......"

Based on the ladies' indecisive appearance, Tatsuya inferred that they must be talking about the "Dojigiri".

"It's not that I know everything...... Isn't the Genji 'Dojigiri' quite famous?"

Mari's final attack used three simultaneous attacks from different directions. Much like ninjutsu, in order to hide the identity of the attack, the name "Multiple Slash" was replaced with "Dojigiri" and passed on exclusively by Genji swordsmen. However, in the age where magic had become public knowledge, "Dojigiri" had suddenly vanished, becoming an ability that researchers are aware of but have not witnessed with their own eyes.

"Don't worry, senpai, I will not disclose the details of your technique."

Hearing Tatsuya's reply, Mari's expression was both tentative and embarrassed.

"Of course I believe you...... But also, please don't tell anyone that I can use 'Dojigiri'."

After receiving Tatsuya's confirmation even though he didn't ask for a reason, Mari still continued on for some reason.

"Ah, of course."

Naturally, he complied. And he didn't really want to know the reason either. But, for some reason Mari started to talk about it.

"Thanks for your help. In reality, I didn't actually formally receive training in this technique. I stumbled across this after perusing the contents of ancient texts left at home and having Nao assist me in training and somehow ended up learning it."

After listening to Mari's explanation, Tatsuya judged that the "Nao" she spoke of must refer to Chiba Naotsugu. Speaking of which, that earlier "Dojigiri" included elements from the "Genius of Magic Close Combat".

"I see, so that's why your attack included 'Pressure Slash'."

"Exactly. Also, my house lies on the tail end of the Watanabe Family. I am of the Genji style, but my house's position isn't very high. If the Watanabe Family knows that I can use the Secret Sword of the Genji, then some trouble may arise......"

"Still, given your status as a combat Magician, I doubt you can keep that a secret for long."

In the end, this point was unavoidable. Mari's face darkened as Tatsuya pointed this out.

"I know that, but I hope to keep this a secret while I'm still a student."

Seeing Mari pout, Mayumi burst into laughter.

"Understood, I'll keep that to myself."

At any rate, Tatsuya had no intention of interfering with mundane matters of such level, especially because they had nothing to do with him. Handling something like this was a piece of cake for someone like him.

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On the Friday evening that was two days before the official commencement of the "National High School Magic Thesis Competition", he received a phone call from Fujibayashi after eating dinner and taking a bath.

"......In other words, the mobile forces for spies have all been apprehended in the past two or three days."

After speaking these words clearly in an official capacity, Fujibayashi finally relaxed on the other side of the monitor.

"The intel Tatsuya-kun provided was a huge help. Thanks."

"Hardly, I was the one who made the request in the first place."

"That may be so, but the magic high school and FLT were not the only victims. Industrial spies are a headache not only for the semiconductor industry and magic academies, they also pose trouble for manufacturers as well. Intelligence and counter intelligence are not under our purview, but based on the nature of our unit, we cannot simply turn a blind eye to spies using magic to accomplish their objectives. So we planned to move out soon even without your communication, which merely hastened the operation time and really helped me out a lot."

"Is that so. Now that you mentioned it, where did the news from the relic leak from?"

"This is a little embarrassing, but the military's operational data was leaked out. In the end, based on the military's allocations for magic research and grants, they went down their list of targets."

So that's how it was, Tatsuya thought. No wonder their methods seemed so unprofessional.

So they were literally fumbling around in the dark. The intrinsic value of this might be low, but intel wasn't something that had uniform quality in the first place. Even the really valuable pieces of information that were mined from patent databases were one in a thousand, which may be why the spies adopted this plan of action.

"While the majority of those we caught were of East Asian nationalities, we may have been able to catch wind of our quarry."

"You seem quite pleased."

"Restraint isn't a bad thing, and I'm a cautious person after all. Still, since the enemy has the gall to waltz into our backyard, there's no need to suffer that. We may need to call on your support at that time, so take care."

"If there's a mission at stake, I have no objections. Thank you for the notification."

"You're welcome. Good luck on Sunday. I'll be there to cheer you on."

After encouraging Tatsuya, Lieutenant Fujibayashi hung up the phone. Plainly, she hadn't put much thought into the manipulator pulling the strings in the dark and saw this incident as the typical magic industry spying incident. Actually, even Tatsuya had no idea that "their opponent" was on such a scale.

Alas, they took their enemy too lightly.

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Having returned to the living room, Tatsuya collapsed onto the couch. Truthfully, it was very rare for him to show fatigue such as this. In terms of pure stamina, simply keeping vigil all night for a week straight would normally not wear him out to this extent. However not only did he have to work on a thesis dealing with one of the "Three Great Puzzles for Gravity Magic", a Sustained Gravity Control-Type Magic Sequence Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor, he also had to use his unique ability in analyzing structures to investigate a relic which modern technology could not hope to replicate, on top of looking out for spies. He was mentally exhausted as well.

Emptying his head for the moment, Tatsuya closed his eyes as he leaned back into the one seat sofa, curving his neck and resting his head on the backrest. There was no particular meaning to this position, simply his mood.

Sitting next to her brother as always, Miyuki was not irritated at all that Tatsuya had suddenly retreated into his own world. Leaving himself defenseless to this extent was something he reserved for her presence alone. Miyuki was overjoyed that Tatsuya would leave himself in her care so.

Miyuki did not wish for her brother to concern himself with her all the time. Just being able to be by his side, even if only for a while, was enough happiness for her. These words by no means meant that Miyuki was a doormat, but rather convey praise. It can safely be said that there is no one who would say such things about her.

Rather than being frustrated, Miyuki was much more worried about her brother. However much he insisted otherwise, not even Miyuki could recall the last time Tatsuya so honestly let his weariness show.

Taking care not to make a sound, Miyuki rose from her seat. Standing before him, she softly leaned closer to his face with their eyes closed. Ensuring that her long hair wouldn't brush against him, she pressed down on it with her left hand. Ensuring that she wouldn't end up accidentally touching him, her right hand pressed onto the sofa supporting her weight. When the hem of her pleat skirt almost fell onto his legs, Miyuki's heart thundered in her chest, but Tatsuya didn't stir. Daringly wearing such a short skirt seems to have unexpectedly paid off, she thought.

Seeing from up close, her brother's complexion wasn't as bad as she had feared. In her relief, she continued observing his face for signs of anything awry. Watching him at this distance, Miyuki's consciousness gradually clouded. As her mind went blank she began to forget what she was thinking and doing, as her face slowly crept closer to his.

Her heart pounding, blood rushing to her head, she couldn't think of anything at all. Miyuki obliviously stared at her brother's face. Breathless, she didn't even notice that she was holding her breath. Immediately becoming aware of that situation, Tatsuya snapped open his eyes.

Tatsuya and Miyuki's eyes met.

Time stopped. Not just Tatsuya, Miyuki also stood absolutely frozen as if paralyzed.

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki simply stared at each other, their respective expressions full of surprise.

Suddenly, no longer able to sustain her unnatural position, Miyuki fell forward.

Her face closing in on his, Miyuki's lips rapidly approached Tatsuya's own.

Regardless of intention, just before the two of them crossed a line which absolutely should not be crossed.

—Tatsuya's body came back online.

"Watch out!"

Faster than his voice traveled, his hands whipped out and supported his sister's shoulders.

"Kya!"

Unable to forcibly keep herself up, or perhaps just out of energy, Miyuki's feet staggered and she sank to her knees onto the couch. Or rather, she sank into Tatsuya's lap who was sitting on the couch.

The two froze again.

Once again close enough to kiss, Miyuki and Tatsuya stared at each other.

Tatsuya's hands were wrapped firmly around Miyuki's shoulders,

and Miyuki was straddling Tatsuya on her knees.

This time, the ice melted quicker.

Taking care their near mistake didn't become reality, Tatsuya brought his head back to its original position.

Tatsuya's eyes dropped from her face to her chest, then further down.

Following her brother's gaze, Miyuki gingerly looked down at her own body. She did so 'gingerly' because she was already well aware of her own state without even seeing.

Sure enough, not only was she kneeling on her brother, her legs were spread beyond the original allowance of her short pleat skirt such that her underwear was almost visible.

"I am so sorry!!"

With amazing speed Miyuki leapt off Tatsuya, then faster than the wind (yet still dignified enough as to ensure that when her feet hit the ground nothing indecent was exposed) she flew out of the living room straight upstairs.

Diving into her own room, she slammed it shut, locked it, then finally fell back against the door panting. She couldn't muster the energy to stand. Perhaps due to the refined upbringing instilled within her she subconsciously tried to align her knees and sit up straight, but after fleeing into her room she was utterly drained and simply collapsed down to the ground.

She flattened her skirt where she sat, straightened up a bit then just spaced out for a while. Her feverish head refused to think at all. As time passed, her emergency evacuated thought processes returned little by little.

Where she was.

What she was doing.

Why she was alone in her room right now—

Miyuki immediately buried her head in her hands. Her palms felt hot. Even without looking in a mirror, Miyuki knew that her face must have been burning red.

(I, just what was I doing to Onii-sama……!)

She couldn't even begin to understand what she was thinking at the time. All she could think of was that she must have completely lost it.

(Onii-sama and I, almost ki, ki, ki……)

Her consciousness began to overheat again, and she was forced to freeze her thoughts.

Left alone, Miyuki would likely have remained like this until morning. An infinite loop of restarting and freezing.

However, there was no way Tatsuya would leave Miyuki alone,

"Miyuki?"

"Yes!"

And at the sound of Tatsuya's voice calling her name from the other side of the door, Miyuki responded in a panic from the floor.

She steadied herself by pressing hands that had been held against her flushed hot face onto her thighs. Her eyes were so moist that tears threatened to spill out any moment. Her arms were straightened out with such force, as were her shoulders and back, that her entire body trembled slightly. It was almost as if she was scared.

"May I come in?"

"Just wait a moment!"

Even so, within Miyuki, any thought of resisting her brother simply did not exist. She rose rapidly, defying belief that her legs had been powerless until now, and firmly unlocked the door with hands that had been trembling just a while ago.

"Please, come on in."

Shifting sideways as she opened the door, Miyuki made a space for her brother to enter. However, Tatsuya didn't set a foot inside.

He just watched……

Unable to meet her brother's gaze Miyuki tried to casually look away, but she could still feel his eyes on her.

She began to heat up again.

It wasn't a superficial heat from some childish sense of wrongdoing, but rather came from deep within her. That heat continued to rise, not her body temperature but rather perceived temperature—until finally she could bear it no longer, and turned her averted face to meet her brother's eyes.

Miyuki looked up from a height difference of 15 cm. From that distance, the tears gathered in the corner of her eyes were plainly visible. In a hurry, Miyuki tried to raise her hands and dry herself. However, before she knew it both Tatsuya's hands were already cradling her cheeks. Gently, he wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Well, um, how to put this."

As Miyuki stared at him wide-eyed and lost for words, Tatsuya spoke bluntly.

"I'm sorry, I made you worry about me. I'm fine, so Miyuki, don't be so concerned anymore."

Saying so with a clumsy smile, he removed his hands from Miyuki's face.

"I'll clean up downstairs. You rest for today."

Ordering Miyuki in a somewhat embarrassed tone, Tatsuya turned away without waiting for a reply.

Waiting until her brother's back faded from view down the stairs, Miyuki closed the door again.

Walking unsteadily to her bed, she slowly took her clothes off, then slid under the blankets in her underwear.

Having finally made it thus far, Miyuki began frantically rolling around on the bed.

Despite appearing to be in agony all over, her face, unlike before, seemed really happy.

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The short hand on the clock had already reached 12. On the next calendar day, the "National High School Magic Thesis Competition" would officially begin in Yokohama. Of course, even if that was the case, there was no sign of festivities in the streets. The Thesis Competition held significant value for magic high school students, especially for the students who had been selected as representatives, to the point that it could impact future major events, but for the average plebeian who had no connection to magic, this event was no different than the dozens of gatherings that were held annually.

On China Street, which remained one of Yokohama's primary entertainment venues even in this age, the overwhelming majority of the stores still opened and closed at their usual times.

Among these stores, one of the larger restaurants appeared to be closed for the evening on the outside. Yet within, there was a suite that could not be seen from the exterior. Inside, two men sat there facing one another.

There were two cups on the table. Filled to the brim with matured wine, the cups were worthy of being called luxuries, but neither of the men took a sip. The young man who brought out the wine considered this to be a waste, but since the older man across from him suffered his cup to remain untouched, he could only mirror that gesture.

"Mr. Zhou, thank you for your considerable assistance."

"You honor me, my lord."

Chen's words were at odds with his arrogant tone, whereas Zhou respectfully bowed from his seat with a slight smile on his face.

"I have already linked up with the fleet dispatched from the homeland. We can now proceed to our next mission."

"It is my pleasure to be of service."

Neither Chen nor Zhou showed any change in facial expression.

"However, there is still one unresolved issue."

"Oh? What is this problem, Lord Chen?"

Superficially, "there was no change", but both were surreptitiously sounding out one another.

"I'm not aware if you already know, but my assistant has run afoul of the fortunes of war and has been captured."

Their expressions subtly changed. Chen adopted a crestfallen expression as he continued.

"This I already know. What a terrible run of luck, I can't believe Mr. Lu would......"

With a gloomy expression, Zhou replied back in a voice filled with heartfelt concern.

"Yet, even though this misstep happened to him, he remains an absolutely integral asset of our country."

Zhou wordlessly nodded his head, signifying his agreement to Chen's words. —Because there was no point in making a promise now.

Zhou remained silent in order to force Chen to lower himself and beg for assistance.

"Can you lend me your aid one more time?"

Chen lowered his head and made his request, to which Zhou responded with a shocked expression followed by a smile.

"Oh, of course, my lord. Even I cannot just stand by and watch my countryman suffer."

Zhou smiled as he rose from the table.

"Actually, two days from now, nay, should be tomorrow based on the hour, Mr. Lu will be transferred to the International Prison in Yokohama."

A truly astounded expression made its way across Chen's face when Zhou dropped this bombshell.

"Truly?"

"Indeed, what a heaven sent opportunity. I already have the transportation route."

Zhou didn't tell Chen that he pulled a few strings to change the transportation date to tomorrow morning. Still, Zhou related all the other details in his comprehensive explanation.

"In return, I wonder if my lord would consider, during the battle on the morrow, to allow this street to......"

"Of course."

After finishing his explanation, Zhou raised his own request with some misgivings, but Chen accepted his proposal before he could even finish.

"The primary objective for tomorrow's battle will be the Kantou branch for the Magic Association. Although combat is inevitable, I will remind my officers in the field to do their best to avoid letting the carnage spread to China Street."

"Thank you very much!"

Zhou knew precisely what Chen meant with that careless promise as he bowed deeply.

—There was still one day until the commencement of the Thesis Competition. In regards to the oncoming storm, Tatsuya remained in the dark.

Afterword

The reason I am able to present you the 6th volume of "Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei" so quickly is all because of your support, the readers.

Therefore I would like to thank you all sincerely from the bottom of my heart.

With the point of view that it is not necessarily good to finish the story in a single volume, this time's "Yokohama Disturbance Chapter" is therefore split into 2 volumes.

Of course, I will not be splitting it into 3 volumes, so you guys can take that load off your minds and just relax. ——Although it shouldn't be something that is worthy of being satisfied about.

I'm sure that everyone knows already, but this light novel originally started off as a web novel, and therefore it is no surprise that most of the content is similar, though some parts have been improved, making it into the "full version" that I am presenting to you right now.

After this "full version" is released, there shouldn't be anymore "New* full version", "Real* full version", "Final* full version" or even "Ultimate* full version" appearing.

——Jokes aside, due to the time constraints faced when publishing the web version, quite a bit of content was left out. However, that has been solved with the release of the light novels, and is the main priority of the publishers.

This time, volume 6 and the soon to be published volume 7 are mostly about filling up all the content that I have left out.

For example, revealing the yet to be seen true characteristics of a certain character, or the up to date being mentioned only in name person's current activities, and also about how a certain someone in the next volume is in a certain kind of relationship with another person due to certain reasons, all these will be in the light novel.

As to what the people involved in the Thesis Competition will soon face during their unlucky (?) and calamity filled presentation, although I have yet to solidify the scenes that will occur in my head, soon I will be able to present them to you, so please wait patiently for them.

Volume 7 will either be published next month or the month after. At the same time, when volume 7 will be out on the latest by September, the media team will also disclose data estimates to everyone.

Next, let us meet in the gloriously and magnificently battle filled "Yokohama Disturbance Chapter (II)".

(Satou Tsutomu)

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